

# Otto Schvalb

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Presov

Slovak Republic

Interviewer: Martin Korcok

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Mr. Otto Schvalb lives with his wife on the outskirts of the town of Presov, in a beautiful apartment furnished with antiques. He and his wife are immensely kind and hospitable people with a sense of humor. Mr. Schvalb worked as a dentist and university professor for a long time. He fell under nature's spell while still young, and has returned to it with affection, time and again throughout his whole life. He has had to give up this passion of his in the last year due to health problems.



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## My family background

I don't remember my great-grandparents, because they died almost as soon as I was born. I only remember my grandparents. My grandparents on my father's side were the Schvalbs. Grandfather's name was Moric Schvalb, and was born in 1859. He worked as a merchant in the town of Presov. He owned a mixed-goods store. He sold flour, sugar and similar things. My grandfather on my father's side was an Orthodox Jew. During the time of my youth, Presov had both a Neolog [1](#) and Orthodox community [2](#). This basically meant that the Orthodox Jews were stricter than the Neologs. In everyday life, the difference between the two communities manifested itself mainly in the fact that Orthodox Jews attended their synagogue every Friday and Saturday, and of course during all holidays.

My father's mother was named Hermina Schvalbova, nee Frankl. In her birth certificate it says that she was born in Stiavnicka, but her family lived in Vychodna. She was born in 1863. My grandmother kept a kosher household. She had separate utensils for meat and milk. The wife of their building superintendent used to help her out at home. For example, she would wash my grandparents' dishes. Because they kept Sabbath, they weren't allowed to work on Friday evening and on Saturday. They wouldn't even turn on the lights; usually I did that. I wasn't as religious as my grandparents.

My father's parents lived right in the center of Presov, on Main Street. They lived in a spacious house. My parents and I lived in the front part of the house, facing Main Street. My father was a doctor, and also had his office there. My grandparents lived in the back part of the tract, where they had their own house. It was actually an extension to the main house. That's where they lived. There, they had two rooms, a kitchen, pantry and washroom. My grandfather's store was beside my father's clinic. In the time of my youth the building already had electricity, and we also had running water. In the back there was a courtyard that was completely paved with stone tiles. In the time of my father's youth my grandparents had a doggie, but they had the poor thing shot. We later also had a dog.

My grandfather had another house built in the courtyard. He had it as insurance, that when he would be old and not able to work, he could live from renting it out. Two Jewish families lived in it. Downstairs there was the family of a teacher, and upstairs the family of some merchant. Both families were Orthodox. I was friends with their children, but otherwise I have to say that most of my friends were from the Neolog community. Of course, during Sabbath we couldn't play in the courtyard, because my grandfather would yell at us. So we went to play elsewhere. Despite the fact that I belonged to the Orthodox community, I believed teachings that were less strict. Our Orthodox synagogue in Presov was one of the most beautiful in Central Europe. Even the Neolog one was nice. It had a choir, so we used to go sing there, because in the Orthodox one it wasn't allowed. Otherwise, as I say, my father was Orthodox, his father was also Orthodox, I was also Orthodox, but I was already a modern Orthodox.

My grandfather wore clothing normal for the times. Because in those days he lived in the modern world, so he also dressed like every other person. If he had lived 300 years ago, he would have dressed according to the times. He would have had a yellow belt and dressed like all Jews. I can't remember very well whether he wore tallit under his clothing, but I think so. He never forgot his hat before leaving the house. My grandmother also dressed according to the times. Despite being Orthodox, she never wore a wig. My father's parents never visited the mikveh in town.

Before the war, the Orthodox rabbi in Presov was Mr. Lau. After him came a rabbi from Stropkov. I don't remember his name any more, despite the fact that he was a famous rabbi. He was a very interesting and wise person. People in the town ranked him among the miraculous rabbis. A number of interesting stories from my life are connected with him. Because my father was a doctor, when the rabbi had health problems, he got used to calling my father. On one such occasion he asked my father how big his family was. My father said that he had a son. At that time I was about three months old. The rabbi gave my father an orange and told him to have my mother cut it in half, to eat one half and put the other half away. My mother put the second half away at the back of a cupboard and completely forgot about it. After about ten years that half of the orange was found, and imagine that it hadn't rotted!

The rabbi used to visit graves in Poland. During one such trip, as he was walking among the graves, he cut his leg on a wire. When he returned to Presov, his leg was already swollen. He called my father, who said to him, 'Mr. Rabbi, you have to go to the hospital, because it needs more serious medical treatment, otherwise you're in danger of blood poisoning.' Upon hearing this, the rabbi called a shammash and gave him a prayer book, into which he had placed a piece of paper, and refused to go to the hospital. My father asked him what was written on the piece of paper. The rabbi answered, 'I wrote down when I'm going to die.' And it also happened that way. He knew the

date of his own death in advance!

The main thing I remember about my grandfather is that I used to annoy him quite often. We used to play soccer in the courtyard and he didn't like that. We damaged the walls with a shovel, broke a window, but otherwise everything was all right. I remember my grandmother better. She was a very beautiful woman. She more or less buzzed about the household, and when visitors came, she would attend to them. That was what was required by the times. She went about dressed in dark clothing; in those days that was the fashion.

My grandfather on my mother's side was named Gustav Kempler. He owned a textile shop. He was born in 1870 in the town of Nowy Targ, which today belongs to Poland. He came to what is today Slovakia during the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. He settled in Trstena na Orave. He opened a store there and prospered. He was a well-positioned man. As far as Jewishness goes, Grandpa went to the synagogue. The town had a Jewish community and a cantor. However, my maternal grandfather was more modern than my father's father. He died in 1935. They took him to the hospital in Ruzomberk, and there they declared that he had cancer.

My grandmother on my mother's side was named Jana Kemplerova, nee Reisz. She was born in 1880. She came from Liptovska Sielnica. Today the town is partly flooded by the Liptovska Mara water reservoir. Sielnica was a big village. My grandmother's father was a farmer; he had horses and such.

My mother's parents lived in Trstena na Orave. Grandpa owned a store and family house, which had three rooms, a pantry and washroom. In the courtyard in the back they had a smaller house where the helpers who worked in grandpa's store lived. There were no farm animals in the courtyard, only a large garden. My mother's brothers, that is, my uncles, used to take care of the garden. My mother's youngest brother, Martin Kempler, was only eleven years older than me. So he and I used to hike around the surrounding mountains. So he took care of the garden along with my grandmother. While my mother was still single, she lived with her parents, four brothers and a sister. Her sister died in 1921 at the age of 16. I don't remember her name.

I had a few funny experiences with my grandparents. My grandfather once had an elegant suit made. He came home, carefully laid it out and left. I saw long pants, took some scissors, and nicely cut some of it off. I made them into shorts. Grandpa was angry, but didn't beat me. If his sons had done it, they would have for sure gotten walloped. I could have been all of six at the time. But I used to do similar things at home as well. My father's younger brother, Eugen Schvalb, who was a lawyer, used to very much like soups: chicken, beef, it didn't matter. When my mother would prepare them for him, I was used to 'nicely' seasoning those soups. He wouldn't scold me, but only ask for a different soup.

The difference between life in Presov and Trstena was big. In Trstena, that was different fun, different friends. In Presov they were burgher's boys, in Trstena farmer's boys. They would go about on horses, take them to water and so on. I don't know how many Jews lived in Trstena. I'm assuming that there were a bit over a hundred, maybe 120. They had their own synagogue and school. But when I stayed with my grandparents in Trstena, I didn't go to the synagogue. During Sabbath we mainly played cards. My grandfather's store was of course closed during Sabbath; no business was done during that time. I would say that my grandfather wasn't religious, but kept that Jewish 'form.'

Trstena didn't even have any non-Jewish shops; all the merchants in the town were Jews. My grandfather Kempler had a large textile shop. He sold textiles and shoes. Then there was a hardware store in town. The hardware store belonged to Baumann. His son was a doctor, he was named Otto Baumann. He disappeared during the Slovak National Uprising [3](#); they killed him. Then there was a mixed-goods store. The owner was named Strauss. He also sold sweets. The soda shop was owned by Sajn. There was a hotel in town; the owner was named Stoter.

In my own way I liked all of my grandparents, in that child's way. Despite this, I had a better relationship with the ones in Trstena. Maybe also because I saw them less often. I would go there for summer holidays, and at Christmas, so once, twice a year. I would go there together with my parents. I was together with my father's parents constantly, so I was more used to them. My mother's mother treated me more affectionately, or how shall I put it. It's hard to define. My mother's mother baked excellent goodies.

Whenever we came by train to visit them during winter, a horse-drawn sleigh would be waiting for us. The train station was about a kilometer from town. There was a lot of snow. A roast goose would be waiting for us on the table as the first meal. Grandma also made excellent 'Koszut crescents.' It was this delicious fine pastry made of vanilla dough, brushed with egg and sprinkled with sugar. Very good. In those days they didn't make cakes, as far as I remember. People liked different sweets. One always ate and drank well at my grandparents' in Trstena. In one word, everything there was good.

Grandma and Grandpa Kempler spoke several languages. Between themselves and with me they spoke Slovak and Hungarian. They had already studied in Slovak schools. However, with my father my grandmother spoke German. Grandma and Grandpa Schvalb from Presov spoke exclusively German. One can't say, though, that only German was spoken among the Jews in Presov. People also spoke Hungarian, and because my mother was, as they say a Slovak 'from the floor,' she spoke excellent Slovak. However my mother also communicated very well in the Hungarian language. Otherwise, in the Saris region, during the time of my youth, Slovak predominated. However, a Saris dialect was spoken, and Hungarian words were inserted. [Editor's note: Saris is a historic land in the northern part of Eastern Slovakia and named after Saris Castle. It is made up, essentially, of the districts of Presov, Bardejov, Svidnik and Stropkov, the first of these being the regional cultural and economic centre. Among Saris' popular leisure resorts are the Domasa Dam, and the winter centers of Drienica-Lysa and Buce. Evidence of the region's culture and history is abundant, including distinct popular tradition and surviving folk architecture, the pride of the region being, its wooden churches, and more numerous here than in any other part of Slovakia. Totalling no fewer than twenty-six, they are together classified as a National Cultural Site.]

In Bratislava they didn't understand this language very much. Hungarian and German dominated in intellectual circles; they spoke Slovak, but not as well. I think that until the year 1918, when the [First Czechoslovak] Republic [4](#) was created, they spoke Hungarian. But after as well, because Slovakia didn't have teachers that knew how to teach Slovak, so Czechs used to come here and teach it. That wasn't Slovak, though, but Czechoslovak. Civil servants, however, had to start to learn Slovak; it would have been hard to replace them all at once. But beginnings were hard, and Hungarian was used, up until for example the courts were completely Slovak.

My father, Alexander Schvalb, was one of two children. His brother, Eugen Schvalb, was a lawyer. My father got along very well with his brother. In those days it just didn't happen that two Jewish siblings would argue. And it didn't happen! Our entire family in Presov lived in a large house on Main Street, where everyone, that is, my father's parents, my father's brother Eugen, and my father, had their own separate apartment. Our former President Havel [5](#), called a house inhabited in this way a 'rabbit hutch.' Eugen was single. His apartment was made up of two rooms and a washroom. He also had an office in his apartment. Despite the fact that all the families lived in the same house, everyone led his own household. For example, when dinner was being made, my grandmother would cook her own at her place, and so would my mother. Only my father's brother didn't cook. He ate mainly at his parents'. My mother would of course also invite him over.

My father's brother devoted himself to his law practice. During his free time he would go to a coffee house, where he would meet with friends. It was an exclusively Jewish group. Today it's not like that any more. When I go to the coffee house, my friends are mostly non-Jews. In those days things were different. There were 20 Jewish doctors in the town, 20 Jewish lawyers, and they had their families, so it was a large community. Of course among them were also businessmen, farmers, engineers – a large community.

My father was born in 1887 in Presov. First he studied at a well-known evangelical college in town, where he got his high school diploma. After the end of his studies at this school, he left for Budapest. There he studied at the medical faculty of the University of Lorant Eotvos. From Budapest he returned to Presov. In time he opened his own office and worked as a general practitioner. His patients came from a mixed society, meaning both Jews and non-Jews. Similarly, there were people from higher circles, but also workers.

In the time of the First Republic there was a so-called medical fund. It's something like today's health insurance. The medical fund, that was more expensive insurance, that's why it had as its clients, let's say only better-situated people. Then there was a so-called worker's insurance company, where my father would always go and see patients for two hours. You know, with doctors it was never the case that at 3pm their workday would be over. Doctors had to be available 24 hours a day; they could be called upon at any time.

If I had to think about my father's interests, I would say that his hobby was listening to folk songs. Always, when he returned home, he would put on a record. He listened to nice, sentimental melodies. He liked this very much. Of course he and my mother also attended balls. However, his work didn't allow him to have much fun. Often it would happen that he'd be called away from a ball, or the movie theater, to a patient, and he'd have to go. That's the difference between then and now. Now, when a doctor finishes his eight hours at work, and isn't on call, he's a free man. At one time it wasn't like that. Poor Father, how many times he had to go. I remember these things very well. Often people would arrive at 2 or 3am, ring and call my father to come see someone who was sick. They didn't come only from the town itself, but also the surrounding quarters. For example, there was a workers' quarter here, called Argentina. Father would get dressed and go.

Our apartment was made up of five rooms. There was a bedroom, den, salon, and dining room. Of course we had a kitchen, bathroom and a veranda too. My father also had a separate office. We had a servant who cleaned and helped my mother with the cooking. She kept house and did the work connected with that. When we had guests, she served them. We had guests quite often.

Mostly they were Jews, but non-Jews also visited us regularly. When my mother's girlfriends came to visit, they would play cards. Male visitors would go to the den, and sit and debate. In those days people entertained themselves differently; today it's not like that any more.

Various groups of people would come to visit my parents. One was solely a card group. These were men from Christian and Jewish society mixed together, and they played cards together. This didn't happen any more in the post-war period. In essence they did it only for fun. They only played for halers [smallest unit of currency, 100 halers = 1 crown]. A person could win at most 10 crowns. That wasn't a huge sum. I think that the change was there only to give the game some purpose. In Presov there were a lot of balls held. There was for example a Jewish Ball, the Matica Ball, the Tennis Ball...Life was very social. [Editor's note: The Slovak Matica was founded at its founding Majority Assembly on 4th August 1863 at St. Martin in Turciany. Its mission is the development and strengthening of Slovak patriotism, to deepen the relationship of citizens to Slovak nationality.]

My father didn't belong to any political party. He was without party affiliation, but people in the town liked him. For example, after World War II they would often invite him over, even the Communists, to social gatherings. In the post-war years my father became an honorary citizen of the town of Presov, which brought him significant privileges.

In my parents' home there was a large bookcase, built into the wall. Imagine how many books it held. It would be hard for me to say what my parents read; I didn't prepare for this interview and didn't think about it. For sure my father also had professional literature, that is not only some light tomfoolery. We also used to subscribe to newspapers – during the First Republic to Kassai Ujsag [a newspaper from Kosice].

My mother, Maria Schvalbova, nee Kemplerova, was born in 1900 in Trstena na Orave. Trstena was a typical Slovak town. What this means is that my mother's native tongue was also Slovak. But she also spoke Hungarian well. My mother had four siblings: Jozef, Mikulas, Bartolomej and Martin. Besides she had a sister, who died at a young age of the Spanish Flu.

Jozef was a doctor in a Moravian spa town, Roznov nad Radhostem. The town was about 20 kilometers from the Slovak border. Uncle Jozef and his wife Margareta, who was also Jewish, had a daughter named Vera. During World War II he and his wife stayed in the Protectorate. They deported him to Terezin, from where we found out that after four days they sent him to Maly Trostinec in Belarus. I had never heard of that place before. The town is between Minsk and Mogilewo. Later the Russians put out a small brochure about that camp, but they only talk about their captured soldiers in it. Nothing about the Jews is written in it. I thought about visiting the place, but in the end I never did. Jozef was the only one of my mother's siblings to not survive the war. He died together with his wife and seven-year-old daughter in the Holocaust.

Another of my mother's brothers was named Martin. He had a master's degree in Pharmacy. He worked as a pharmacist. Mikulas took over the family store from his father, and Bartolomej was a lawyer. What can I tell you about them, they all lived well, liked girls, and liked to eat. Before the war all of my mother's brothers were single. They didn't get married until after World War II.

## Growing up



My name is Otto Schvalb and I was born in Presov, in the year 1925. I was my parents' only child. Despite being an only child, my mother didn't spoil me at all. My mother believed in a good upbringing, which means – how would I say it – she didn't tolerate all the foolishness that I got up to. I always had to be home exactly when she said. Before I reached the age of six, I had a nanny. I liked her, she was a kind girl. She came from around Gelnica. She belonged to the Mantaks, Spis Germans, so we talked mainly German with each other. [Editor's note: More or less tolerated form of German, in the regional dialect called 'mantak', microculture in the quite isolated small town of Medzev (German Metzenseifen) with about 4,000 inhabitants in the valley of the Bodva River in Eastern Slovakia. It deals with the actively spoken Mantak language and with the use or even abuse of mantak elements of folklore (songs, dances, traditional costumes etc.). The original Mantak population, that had been living there since the Middle Ages and that managed to stay during the cruel times of the compulsory transfer under President Benes in 1946/1947, was strongly discriminated against.] At the age of six I began to attend a school where the subjects were taught in Slovak, and maybe also for this reason my parents decided that I don't need a German nanny.

Before the war we observed all the high holidays at home, but for example during Sukkot we didn't put up a tent any more. There were, however, families that did. I can't say that as a child I had a favorite Jewish holiday. I didn't even go to the synagogue very much, only when my grandfather on my father's side took me along with him. Even before the war a little Christmas tree would appear in our household, of course without any sort of cross, only decorated with candy and chocolate. It was mainly for the girls that worked in our household. In the beginning my grandfather was against it, to decorate even a small Christmas tree in our house, but then he let himself be convinced that it wasn't anything important. So we didn't celebrate Christmas at all, only Chanukkah. We would pray and Chanukkah supper would be prepared. We got gifts. After World War II, in the beginning I observed mainly Yom Kippur. But I only fasted until dinnertime, no later than that.

I attended elementary school for four years, and then I transferred to an Evangelical [Protestant] high school in Presov. Of course we also had catechism classes there. The Protestants went to Protestant classes, the Catholics to theirs, and we Jews also had ours. We were taught by a teacher who also worked at the Jewish school. Once a week he would come to our high school and we had religious education. My favorite subject at school was summer holidays. But if I really had to think about it, I preferred the humanistic subjects, for example history and geography. I liked to travel and my interest in world events has held on to this day. So it's stayed with me. Math and Latin, which I had to learn entirely by memory, I liked less. I liked almost all of the teachers at school, because there weren't any nasty teachers there. Not one of my teachers, with the exception of the catechism teacher, was a Jew. Among my classmates there were a few Jews here and there. But you couldn't say that I was friends only with Jews. I was friends with these, and with those. It was a mixed bunch.

After school my friends and I used to go to the swimming pool. We also boxed. In the winter we used to go skating and skiing at the Calvary [a place where the stations of the cross were]. We also liked to go cycling. We did everything. Often we played Indians. Today children sit in front of the TV until their eyes go baggy. I was also a member of the local Maccabi [6](#) and Slavia sports clubs. In Maccabi I swam, and I played soccer for Slavia. In those days it was amazing. We had four soccer teams. There was ETVE, the Hungarian Torekves, Slavia, and Maccabi. [Editor's note: the evolution

of soccer in Slovakia dates from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th Century, when the ETVE Presov (1896) and PTE Bratislava soccer clubs came into being.] There was a healthy, sporting rivalry between the clubs. As I already said, I didn't play soccer for Maccabi, but for Slavia. The Maccabi team roster was fully occupied by good players, and well, so I got into Slavia. I just played for the junior team. They called us 'patkani' [rats].

The Maccabi in Presov was composed of only Jewish athletes. There were many excellent athletes, who excelled for example in swimming. The Olympic swimming champion Cik was at a competition here, and lost a race. I think that Viktor Mandel beat him. The Olympic champion almost died of shame. But there were also other good swimmers. Poor souls, almost all of them died during the Holocaust; soccer players too, for example Miki Harmann, an excellent forward, renowned for his looks – when he walked onto the field, women went crazy.

### **During the war**

In the pre-war period, no-one took the fact that I was a Jew negatively. I never had an anti-Jewish incident. When the Slovak state [see Slovakia] [7](#) was being created, they walked and shouted: 'Slovakia for the Slovaks, Palestine for the Jews.' Slogans like that against the Jews. Then we of course could no longer go to school and they threw us out of high school. The anti-Jewish laws of course affected me very much. In the end 270 anti-Jewish laws were passed, the so-called Jewish Codex [8](#). Besides being allowed to breathe, everything was forbidden. It was forbidden to go to the park, it was forbidden to go to the movie theater, it was forbidden to go visit the swimming pool, skating was forbidden, everything was forbidden. Of course I didn't pay attention to all the prohibitions. For example, I didn't wear a yellow star [see Yellow Star in Slovakia] [9](#), that didn't even occur to me. I wasn't afraid that I wasn't wearing it. Of course, my parents didn't approve, but I didn't ask them. I simply said that I wasn't going to wear it. It would have been different, if I had looked like a Jew. Those that knew me didn't inform on me, and strangers didn't even notice it. Of course I had to stop hanging out with my non-Jewish friends. Boys who I had played soccer with for Slavia were still my friends, but it wasn't like before. There were even some among them that told the others: 'Leave that Jewish boy, that Jew, be.'

I think that the first transport of Jews from Presov left on 22nd March 1942. On it were boys between the ages of 16 and 18. Then they also sent a girls' transport out of town, but that one was turned back at Poprad. When my father found out that family transports were due to start, we hid. My father's brother was already deceased at that time. He died in 1935 of pneumonia. I hid with my mother and father. Someone informed on us though, the guardsmen [Hlinka-Guards] [10](#) came and took us away. We were gathered in one schoolyard in town. The next day guardsmen came and announced to us that the Germans would 'shine a light' on all of us. They took us to the train station where we were supposed to be put on transports. There were 700 people there, and we were waiting for another 300 from Bardejov who were supposed to arrive by train. However, the train didn't arrive, and because they hadn't gathered together 1,000 people, which was how many were needed to make up a transport, they only sent us to Zilina.

In Zilina they separated us and we went to the local reception camp. From here my mother sent a note to her brothers. One of them had an Aryan fiancée, and she knew the commander of the Zilina reception camp. She was a former classmate of his. They let me and my mother go, and my father stayed in the camp as a doctor. In the end the Minister of Health put out a decree saying that the



state had a shortage of doctors, and so no more doctors of Jewish origin would be let onto transports headed outside of Slovak borders. Aryan doctors were at the front, and many towns were without doctors. So that's how we got to Hrinova. At that point very good times began for me. It was likely sometime at the beginning of August 1942.

In Hrinova there were no Jews or anti-Jewish sentiments. Once again I could run around outside with other boys. We played soccer and volleyball together. In the winter we skied. These new friends of mine took me everywhere with them. The boys and I hiked in the mountains. There was beautiful nature all around us, and that made up for everything for me. I'm a nature lover to this day. I had it relatively good. Despite this it wasn't freedom, because we were still Jews.

Then when the Germans arrived, that was worse. We had to escape to Polana. We left Hrinova together with the army and police, heading towards Banska Bystrica. Luckily, on the way we met a group of soldiers somewhere near Banska Bystrica. They said, 'Don't go there, the Germans were already there.' From the time we left Hrinova, we had to hide out. In Polana, at first the mayor himself hid us. People found out about it though; they also found out that my father was a doctor. People started going to the mayor, as he had a doctor there, and it started to get dangerous. So the mayor found us a hiding place with a local farmer, who he rented land to, he gave him a cow, and said, 'You'll get this, but you have to hide these people.' Maybe we were also lucky because people always liked my father very much. They hid us in the mountains, here and there, because there were German patrols. Once we were in a place where only one single wall separated us from the Germans. I was sleeping on one side of the wall and the Germans on the other. When they coughed, I took advantage of it and coughed as well. If the Germans had found out that we were there, God save us...We were liberated in February 1945.

Grandma Schvalbova also hid with us in Hrinova. When we left there for Polana, grandma stayed. Imagine that when the Russians were liberating the village from German occupation, they threw a grenade into the house where my grandmother was hiding. They covered her with a blanket, and left her there, wounded. She was lying there like that for several days. She held on until we arrived. She saw me, kissed me, wept and died.

In the meantime my parents had returned to Presov. At home they found almost nothing. Our windows were broken, because Presov had been bombed. We didn't find our furniture. During the war, some family from Kosice had been living in our house, from when the Hungarians had occupied Presov. After the war they moved out of our house. We got our house back without any problems, but later, when the Communists came to power, they took it from us. In the year 1948 they won the elections, and that was that. After the war, my father worked as a doctor for a hospital insurance company. My mother stayed at home. My father died in 1968 and is buried in Presov, in the local Jewish cemetery. I think that the Presov cantor Lowy buried him. Each year since, I recite the Kaddish. In the synagogue they announce that it's the anniversary of his death.

Before the war, there were two Jewish religious communities in Presov, Orthodox and Neolog. After the war there remained only one community. Both communities had their own synagogue. The Germans turned the main, Orthodox one, into a stall for horses. In the other, the Neolog synagogue, the Jews who were still in the town during the war were taken care of. They fed them there, and they could also sleep there.

## **After the war**

Right after the liberation I went to Banska Bystrica to study. Because I had been thrown out of school in Presov in 'kvinta' [fifth year], I did sexta and septima [sixth and seventh years] in Bystrica. I finished my education at university in Prague. I started my studies there in 1946, and finished in 1952. Right at that time, the Slansky trials [11](#) began, which also affected me. I think they must have affected everyone. Certainly it left a certain mark in every Jew. After all, there were rants of Slansky, that Jew, Zionist and so on. They knew about me too, that I was of Jewish descent. I didn't announce it to everyone, but it was known. But there were also those that came to tell me that they didn't agree with what was going on. No one knew, however, what was going to be. In the end they convicted 13 people, eleven of them to death. Almost all of them were Jews. It wasn't a good period. Things eased around the year 1953, when Gottwald [Klement Gottwald (1896-1953): President of Czechoslovakia from 1948-1953] and then Stalin died. Then people started to talk about the beastly things that they had done.

I was also a member of the Communist Party [12](#). I joined the Party in 1945-46 and left it in 1970. That is, I left it, but didn't leave it. They got rid of me, I was thrown out. After the war, I joined because I was enthused by the idea of communism. When you read the statutes and program of the Party, it was very humane. There, they talked about rights, about responsibilities, that we are all equal, that there are no differences, and so on and so forth. There was a big pile of these things, so people that were arriving, and had been in the camps [concentration and work camps] and had been persecuted – to them it seemed to be sensible. Then, to top it off, there were additional anti-Jewish sentiments in Slovakia, for example pogroms against Jews in Topolcany. So I saw salvation in the Communists. The Communists were supposed to be people that would protect us, but the opposite happened. Already in 1948, when they won the elections, I noticed that it wasn't going to be the way we had thought. I realized that the Communists were an organization that 'preached water but drank wine.' In the 1950s, that was only its culmination. So even back then it didn't sit well with me.

After I finished my dentistry studies at Charles University in Prague, I got a job at a clinic in Kosice, on Rastislavova Street. There I did three post-graduate certificates, in periodontology. Basically it was my specialization. I worked as a dentist in Kosice for two years, and then moved to Presov. I worked as a dentist from 1952 to 1991, when I went into retirement. I liked my work very much. I devoted myself solely to dentistry, concretely periodontology. I wrote one paper that was accepted at a diabetology congress in Madrid. I worked on it with one colleague, but he wasn't a dentist, but an internist. We concerned ourselves with the influence of saliva on the gums of diabetics. My friend whom I worked on it with left for America, and in 1989 came to see me, saying that I should go there with him. I told him that I didn't want to go any more.

In 1968 [see Prague Spring] [13](#) I was still young and full of hope. It was, after all, a little less restrictive regime. At that time the thing wasn't that the Communists should step down. The thing was that certain things should be made accessible for people. That is, so that people wouldn't be so limited, that they could travel. Then what happened, happened, and for the next 20 years we had it worse than before the year 1968.

During the time of the Communist regime, we took vacations everywhere where it was possible. Often we went to Bulgaria, twice we went to Yugoslavia, once to Italy, and of course to Hungary. Because I've been through a few Communist countries, I can compare it to the situation in Czechoslovakia. I think that our country was a showcase of Socialism. We really had everything

here. The Germans were maybe a bit better off, but not in everything. Germans had to wait for a car for eight years, ten years, and then got a Trabant. So there were also positives here. It wasn't all bad. But as far as the level of cultural development, freedom of speech and similar things goes, that was bad. During the time of totality we had family in many parts of the world, for example in Australia, Germany and the USA. We didn't have any problems that we had family members living in the 'West.' Starting in the 1970s they visited us regularly.

I did my army service as a dentist in an army hospital in Kosice. So, one can't say that I was in the army as such. Later I was even on army exercises. We also had exercises in the army hospital. When I was on call, ambulances had to report to me what calls they had had, and so on. Then I had to report this to the hospital commander. I had the rank of second lieutenant, and so I had it good.

There are of course many experiences connected with my army service. Once I was on duty in the army hospital in Kosice. I had my own room there, and signed leave papers for the soldiers. One older man from Kosice, who was on army exercises, came to me and asked me for a permit. He told me that he wanted to be with his wife in the evening, could I make it until midnight. Midnight came, and he was nowhere to be seen. At 1am someone pounded on my door. I opened it. Before me stood two guards with the soldier that I had lost. 'Please sir, we caught him in a cafe, what should we do with him?' The man was afraid of what was going to happen to him. But he was very lucky; they punished him by forbidding him further leaves. Then I asked him why he hadn't asked for a permit until 2 or 3am, that I would have signed it for him, and why hadn't he returned? He told me that he had gotten into a fight at home with his wife...Those were the kinds of laughs we had in the army. It was good army service. The soldiers liked to go out with me, because I didn't need a permit. In the coffee house they would sit down with me, because when soldiers would go around and check permits, they wouldn't ask anyone sitting with me, because I was a second lieutenant. It was a gas.

I met my wife in an interesting way. Even before we had met for the first time, I had heard about her from one young Jewish guy in Prague. He told me that he knew this one young 17-19-year-old girl in Zilina. I didn't know whom he was talking about, and wasn't even interested. By coincidence my mother was at some spa with a family lady friend. She asked my mother about her family. She said that she had a son who was a doctor, aged 28. And this lady friend said, 'is he single? Because, you know, I have a friend, she's got a daughter, she's about to graduate, she's also single, and we'd like for her to have a Jewish boy.' The women arranged it, as if all that was left for me to do was simply get married.

My mother told me about it, that she had met a lady who had a friend in Zilina, and that that friend had a daughter...In short my mother told me about it when she came back from the spa. The first time my wife and I met was in Zilina. I said to myself, 'buddy, you're already an old goat, it's time to maybe settle down.' Twenty-nine years gone, it's time to get married. So it was arranged and we came to Zilina. An uncle of hers, whose place we were meeting at, was waiting for us at the train station. We sat down at his place, drank coffee, and then she arrived, my future wife, and we started to talk. I said to myself, 'nice-looking girl,' which is of course very important. You know, I have to blow my own trumpet a bit: I was going out with a girl in Prague, who was so pretty that everyone, almost everyone turned around to look at her; she was a very nice-looking woman. Of course she left me; that's the danger with pretty women.

In Zilina we agreed that at Christmas I would go skiing to the Krkonose Mountains, and would stop by on the way back home. I was returning home from Krkonose, but we were an hour late. The train was supposed to arrive at 10pm, but arrived at 11. I was traveling with a friend, and I said to him, 'Listen, I need to make a phone call to that family.' And he said, 'If you call now, you'll wake them. They're sleeping, it's almost 11:30.' So I let it be, I didn't call. I got home, where she called me. It was good manners, to not say anything.

After some time she had an interview in Kosice. Her parents called me, asking whether I could find a hotel for her. My mother heard this, and said, 'No hotel, she'll stay at our place, I'll be responsible for her.' And she really did come to Kosice, we went to a cafe together, then dancing, and then home to Presov to my parents' place. We got to know each other a little better, I knew what her opinions were, and I knew that she was a very smart girl. Though she had a lot of suitors, they gradually fell away. In the summer I traveled to Zilina, and we used to go to Strecno. I had an old Opel in which we would drive there. We took in the beautiful countryside, and everything else, and decided to get engaged.

We had a Jewish wedding in Zilina. Cantor Halpert from Zilina married us. For our honeymoon we went to Prague. This was in the year 1954. I remember our honeymoon very well. We had reserved a sleeping car on the train from Zilina to Prague. However, the train that arrived from Banska Bystrica had no sleeping car, as it had been disconnected at Vrutky due to a malfunction. The wedding guests were very entertained by this incident. In the end my wife and I, Judit Schvalbova, nee Donathova, settled in Presov.

I don't know how religious of a family my wife came from, you know, I didn't go to the synagogue with them. But I think that they were reasonably religious. My wife's uncle was the 'minyanman' [a person that fills in the number of Jews, so that a minyan is reached, the minimum of ten men necessary for public prayers] in Zilina, so he went to the synagogue on both Friday and Saturday. If he would have been missing, theoretically they couldn't even have had a service. After our wedding, our entire family went to the synagogue, including my parents. My wife even observed the fasts, but not I. For the bigger holidays I even took time off.

As far as the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 is concerned, for me as a Jew it has little significance. The state was a guarantee that the status of Jews in the world will be different, that's one thing, and the second is that if some problems arise again, people will have someplace to go. Today Israel has the opportunity to come forward, whether in the UN or wherever, and express its opinion. During the Israeli wars I was very angry, because the Communists presented the entire situation the wrong way around. They branded Israel as the aggressor, while the opposite is true. You know, there are recordings that show the Arab leaders talking about how they'll drive all Jews into the sea. The Communists twisted it around and people believed it. When something is repeated many times, it's said that even a lie becomes the truth. However, I don't recall anti-Jewish sentiments from that time. Only in television and radio, they accused Israel of aggression.

I visited Israel for the first time in 1992. The entire country surprised me, in the positive sense of the word: the housing developments, how they were able to turn the desert into fields, their whole irrigation systems. How, with such a lack of water, they were able to ensure a developed state that was able to compete with any other country in the world. That means that Israel is viable. Today it's a developed country, that is agriculturally industrial, that has such economic successes that

others learn from it, mainly those that go there to work. That is something incredible. And then the cities that they built, people see that. As opposed to the Arab side: an Arab has a beautiful house built, but around it there's nothing, a wasteland. A Jewish village isn't built as luxuriously, but houses have gardens, greenery, trees and so on. Those are the differences.

Because of course not everything is positive, just like in every person, so in Israel, too, you can find something negative. The thing that made the most negative impression on me were Orthodox Jews. We were in one neighborhood, and right away you recognize that something's not right. These are the jarring elements, but otherwise Israel is a very nice country.

After the year 1989 [see Velvet Revolution] [14](#) big changes took place in Czechoslovakia. These also affected the Jewish religious community in Presov. Before, it was a community only on paper. There was one chairman, who did what he was told. After the war the community didn't get any property back, so we had nothing. People were afraid to go to the synagogue. Such were the times, but despite this some people attended secretly. I myself went on only the major holidays. I wasn't religiously inclined and also I didn't want to risk anything. After all, it was a small state, and it wasn't good when they designated you as unreliable. Today people don't go to the synagogue very much, just during the major holidays, but now it's a completely different situation. Now there just aren't enough people. In the last few years those of us that were persecuted during World War II have begun to get money from the Claims Conference.

Currently I am the vice-chairman of the Jewish religious community in Presov, but it's only an honorary function, I'd say. As far as synagogues are concerned, that's a little worse: a person would have to see them to know what state they're in. Look, it's fair to say that once there was a synagogue in every town in Slovakia. Wherever there were 50 Jews, they built a synagogue. These synagogues disappeared after the war. But the rest prosper, some less, some more. Now these things are being exposed to the wider public, even TV sometimes broadcasts something. Back then [before 1989] no one rather said anything. It was a different situation.

Certain changes took place in my personal life as well. I could for example travel freely. I was in the USA, Switzerland – there where before I couldn't go. I didn't have to worry about any informants, and that someone was watching me. I wasn't afraid before either, but in this political system a person is conscious of freedom. Well, and of course exceptions of the type 'you're a Party member, you're not,' stopped being made. You can, you can't. There was a lot of negativity in that. In fact it was mostly negative. But larger changes didn't happen in my life; after all, I did have my years and was in retirement.

The separation of Czechoslovakia was also something that could be expected. You know, there were always such tendencies. Maybe it's also because according to me it's not good to always listen to a certain refrain that was sung by certain nationalistic parties. For my part, I was never in favor of it being divided. After all, during those decades something had been mutually created. When a person looks at it from my viewpoint, the viewpoint of a person that isn't considered to be a born and bred Slovak, separation was a mistake. But when you ask people here, most of them will tell you the same thing. However, you can also find a few of those that will say that it's better this way. In politics it was all caused by Klaus [15](#) and Meciar [16](#). Everyone was sick of it, and in the end we split up. After all, now we're in the European Union, and it doesn't matter any more. Currently the political party that's closest to my views is the SDKU [Slovak Democratic and



Christian Union, leader Mikulas Dzurinda]. Lately though, Dzurinda's [17](#) statements aren't the best.

## Glossary

### **1 Neolog Jewry**

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

### **2 Orthodox communities**

The traditionalist Jewish communities founded their own Orthodox organizations after the Universal Meeting in 1868-1869. They organized their life according to Judaist principles and opposed to assimilative aspirations. The community leaders were the rabbis. The statute of their communities was sanctioned by the king in 1871. In the western part of Hungary the communities of the German and Slovakian immigrants' descendants were formed according to the Western Orthodox principles. At the same time in the East, among the Jews of Galician origins the 'eastern' type of Orthodoxy was formed; there the Hassidism prevailed. In time the Western Orthodoxy also spread over to the eastern part of Hungary. 294 Orthodox mother-communities and 1,001 subsidiary communities were registered all over Hungary, mainly in Transylvania and in the north-eastern part of the country, in 1896. In 1930 30,4 % of Hungarian Jews belonged to 136 mother-communities and 300 subsidiary communities. This number increased to 535 Orthodox communities in 1944, including 242,059 believers (46 %).

### **3 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.

### **4 First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938)**

The First Czechoslovak Republic was created after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy following World War I. The union of the Czech lands and Slovakia was officially proclaimed in Prague in 1918, and formally recognized by the Treaty of St. Germain in 1919. Ruthenia was added by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. Czechoslovakia inherited the greater part of the industries of the

Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the new government carried out an extensive land reform, as a result of which the living conditions of the peasantry increasingly improved. However, the constitution of 1920 set up a highly centralized state and failed to take into account the issue of national minorities, and thus internal political life was dominated by the struggle of national minorities (especially the Hungarians and the Germans) against Czech rule. In foreign policy Czechoslovakia kept close contacts with France and initiated the foundation of the Little Entente in 1921.

## **5 Havel, Vaclav (1936- )**

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

## **6 Maccabi World Union**

International Jewish sports organization whose origins go back to the end of the 19th century. A growing number of young Eastern European Jews involved in Zionism felt that one essential prerequisite of the establishment of a national home in Palestine was the improvement of the physical condition and training of ghetto youth. In order to achieve this, gymnastics clubs were founded in many Eastern and Central European countries, which later came to be called Maccabi. The movement soon spread to more countries in Europe and to Palestine. The World Maccabi Union was formed in 1921. In less than two decades its membership was estimated at 200,000 with branches located in most countries of Europe and in Palestine, Australia, South America, South Africa, etc.

## **7 Slovakia (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.

## **8 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.

## **9 Yellow star in Slovakia**

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

## **10 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.

## **11 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, so 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 December 3, 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.

## **12 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.

### **13 Prague Spring**

A period of democratic reforms in Czechoslovakia, from January to August 1968. Reformatory politicians were secretly elected to leading functions of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC). Josef Smrkovsky became president of the National Assembly, and Oldrich Cernik became the Prime Minister. Connected with the reformist efforts was also an important figure on the Czechoslovak political scene, Alexander Dubcek, General Secretary of the KSC Central Committee (UV KSC). In April of 1968 the UV KSC adopted the party's Action Program, which was meant to show the new path to socialism. It promised fundamental economic and political reforms. On 21st March 1968, at a meeting of representatives of the USSR, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, East Germany and Czechoslovakia in Dresden, Germany, the Czechoslovaks were notified that the course of events in their country was not to the liking of the remaining conference participants, and that they should implement appropriate measures. In July 1968 a meeting in Warsaw took place, where the reformist efforts in Czechoslovakia were designated as "counter-revolutionary." The invasion of the USSR and Warsaw Pact armed forces on the night of 20th-21st August 1968, and the signing of the so-called Moscow Protocol ended the process of democratization, and the Normalization period began.

### **14 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 citizens' 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.

### **15 Klaus, Vaclav (born 1941)**

Czech economist and politician. After the fall of communism, he was Finance Minister, then Prime Minister, and he was elected President of the Czech Republic in 2003. Klaus took part in the founding of the Civic Forum in 1989, in 1991 he was cofounder of the right-of-center Civic Democratic Party (ODS). As Prime Minister he negotiated the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia on behalf of the Czech part. He was a leading force behind privatization and a proponent of minimum state intervention in the economic process.

### **16 Meciar, Vladimir (born 1942)**

leader of the People's Party – Movement for Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS) and former Prime Minister of Slovakia. He led Slovakia to the disengagement from the Czech Republic. He was one of the leading presidential candidates in Slovakia in 1999 and 2004. He has been criticised by his opponents as well as by Western political organisations for having an autocratic style of administration and lack of respect for democratic order.

### **17 Dzurinda, Mikulas (born 1955)**

current Prime Minister of Slovakia. He has been Prime Minister since 1998 for the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) and was re-elected in 2002 for the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union.