Ladislav Porjes

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Ladislav David Porjes is a journalist, translator and writer. He comes from Zilina, in Central Slovakia, from the family of the well-known and popular lawyer Arpad Porjes. At the age of ten months he lost his mother, and at the age of three he became a complete orphan. He was raised by his grandparents in Zilina, alternating with his second set of grandparents in Michalovce in Eastern Slovakia. Since childhood he has thus moved about in two worlds: in Zilina he was raised in Slovak and German in a Neolog 1 spirit; in Michalovce he absorbed Yiddish and the Zemplin dialect in an Orthodox 2 family of descendants of an important 'miraculous' rabbi. His adolescence was significantly marked by the establishment of Tiso's 3 Slovak State 4 – as a Jew he wasn't able to study, was forced to join the so-called Sixth Labor Battalion 5, where he did forced labor. He twice managed to escape from there. For some time he lived and worked in Bratislava under cover of false Aryan documents. Despite this, Auschwitz didn't pass him by. After escaping from Birkenau, he helped uncover members of the SS at the Allied command in Krakow. After the war he married and raised two daughters. He worked as a reporter and foreign correspondent for the radio and press agencies. In the 1950s the persecutions connected with the political trials affected him as well. In the year 1962 he published a book of memoirs, 'Josele a Ti Ostatni' [Josele And The Others], one of the first works about the tragedy of the Holocaust to be published in Czechoslovakia.
After 1968 [see Prague Spring] 6 he was prevented from working as a journalist, and up until he went on disability pension, he worked as a gatekeeper, stock clerk or in other degrading positions. He secretly supplemented his income doing anonymous translations.
He's looking forward to soon celebrating with his much-loved wife their 60th, or Diamond, wedding anniversary. They live together with their favorite pet, their little dog Tomicek, in a Prague apartment filled with beautiful pictures. For collecting artwork has for long years been Mr. Porjes's hobby – during difficult times when their family's situation was bad due to political persecution, he was forced to sell part of his collection. Today Ladislav Porjes is a fervent and successful competitive chess player for the Slavoj Zizkov team. Hopefully the interview's pleasant atmosphere will be evident from the following text.

After the war

Glossary

My family background

To begin with, I'd like to quote something as a motto: Robert Louis Stevenson [Stevenson, Robert Louis (1850–1894): Scottish writer and essayist] said that 'Life is not a matter of holding good cards, but of playing a poor hand well,' Pablo Picasso [Picasso, Pablo (1881–1976): Spanish painter, graphic artist, sculptor and ceramic artist of Basque origin], remarked that 'Wisdom consists of making in each of life's stages only those mistakes that are appropriate for your age' – and so if the reader will read my stories through the prism of these wisdoms, he will, perhaps, not be disappointed.

My grandfather on my father's side, Salamon Porjes, was born in 1858 in Pruzina. He was a toll collector on the Vah [river in Slovakia, length 378 km]. My father's mother, Julie Porjesova [nee Zlatnerova] was born in 1865 in Rosina, Slovakia. In 1880 my grandma and grandpa in Zilina, in central Slovakia, had my father, Arpad Porjes. He was the oldest of eighteen siblings and was the only one in this large family to finish school. He became a lawyer. Even though I don't remember my father, I know that he was a popular lawyer, as when various people would meet me in Zilina in the company of my grandparents, they would always talk highly of him. They told me that my father had been a treasure, and stroked my head. I heard that there was quite a marked difference in how my father treated various clients. He was called the 'lawyer of the poor,' as he represented poor people for free, while making it up on the rich. It enabled him to give a dowry and very decently marry off eight of his thirteen sisters.

When I was not quite three years old, my father died from consequences of an amateurishly treated wound that he had gotten on the Italian front 7 during World War I, where he had fought as a cadet for one year. Thus I became an utter orphan – together with me, however, were also 'orphaned' those of my aunts who hadn't yet gotten married. They embarked upon their last trip to the 'final solution' camp as single women. They may have been attractive, but without a dowry, even a pretty Jewish girl had a hard time finding a husband.

My mother's father, Armin Moskovic, was most likely born in Michalovce, in Eastern Slovakia. He died, thank God, before the war, and so avoided the transports to, at his age certain, death. Between the two World Wars, Michalovce had something over 10,000 inhabitants, of which almost half were Jews. Today their Jewish community is composed of only sixteen Israelites, including women and children. So when a holiday prayer is to take place – a minyan – for which ten adult men are needed, the president of the Michalovce Jewish religious community, Janko Haber, has to make the rounds to neighboring towns and often even far-away ones, to gather up the required number of believers.

My grandmother on my mother's side, Fany Moskovicova [nee Weissova], was also from Michalovce, from the prominent family of the reputedly miraculous Rabbi Weiss. Grandma and Grandpa had a small store where they sold mixed goods. After my grandfather's death, my widowed grandmother had the luck to find the right Aryanizer for her store. He was Pavol Hospodar, a local farmer, Greek Orthodox and an opponent of the pro-Fascist regime. She had to work for a long time to persuade him to agree. From the beginning to the end, he behaved in an

immensely decent manner toward her. He was a ‘white crow’ during times when other Aryanizers were informing on their Jewish fellow citizens in hiding to the Guardists [see Hlinka-Guards] 8, who then arranged their transport into the gas. As direct informers they raked in the houses and entire property of their victims, to whom they had originally offered themselves in the role of saviors. Grandma survived the war; she hid with goyim in a so-called bunker.

My grandmother’s mother, my great-grandmother Mina Weissova, was the daughter of the miraculous Rabbi Weiss. The family was strictly Orthodox, my great-grandmother, for example, had her hair completely cut off and wore this wig on her head. My great-grandma was a ‘witch’ in the good sense of the word. I remember that during puberty I began to get these unpleasant boils that I couldn’t get rid of. I was treated by all sorts of doctors, who always cut the boils open, squeezed them out, applied some salves, but the treatments were unsuccessful, a week later the boils were back, double in number. And so I was called over to see my grandmother, who was a saint that treated everyone we knew and people from the neighborhood for free. My great-grandma proclaimed that she’ll put an end to the boils once and for all. I didn’t believe in her spells and magic, but because it hurt and I couldn’t get rid of the boils, I agreed to let myself be treated by her.

My great-grandma took a chicken, tied its legs together, and began making circles above my head with it. All the while she was mumbling something in Hebrew, which I didn’t understand at all. When she finished with this ceremony, she took the chicken and ritually slit its throat. She had to kill the chicken, as it was actually this ‘gepore’ – a sacrifice that was supposed to rid me of all toxins and my pain. I was laughing to myself at it, I didn’t believe it. I believed a week later, when the boils disappeared. I was completely cured and the boils never returned! So my miraculous grandmother thus convinced me of her abilities. The poor thing ended badly. A member of the Hlinka Guard booted her onto a hay wagon at the age of 96, to a transport to Auschwitz.

My parents met each other through a matchmaker. Back then my father came a-courting to Michalovce from Zilina. It was however all more complicated: my father originally wanted to court my mother’s older sister Paula, who the Moskovics of course wanted to marry off first. They promised my father 100,000 crowns as a dowry for Paula. But my father fell so in love with my mother that he and Grandpa Moskovic agreed that he’d marry my mother, but would however give up the right to a dowry. Today it seems like from a romantic novel – love at first sight. And their love was so strong that my father married my mother even without money. But he was afraid as to what his parents would say, that they’d bawl him out for letting himself be cheated. That’s why he had Grandpa Moskovic write him up a fictional confirmation that my grandpa owes him 100,000 Czechoslovak crowns. In short, my parents’ meeting is a truly romantic tale!

My mother, Ilona Porjesova [nee Moskovicova] was born in 1901 in Michalovce in Eastern Slovakia. I unfortunately don’t have any direct memories of my mother, I know only a little of her life as mediated by things told to me by my grandmother and aunties. For my mother died while giving birth to my unborn sibling of something that today would apparently be called an ectopic pregnancy. At least that’s how my grandma used to tell it to me as a small boy. But when I was a little older, my aunties told me that things had happened a little differently. My aunties said that my mother, Ilonka, was a downright angel. However the cause of her premature death was apparently her own mother. You see, when Grandma Fany arrived in Zilina to see her daughter and ten-month-old tot, she found out that my mother was pregnant again. She persuaded my mother to

secretly have an abortion, without my father, who was at that time on a longer business trip, knowing about it, so that she wouldn't ruin her figure with another childbirth. Grandma dredged up some midwife, who however botched the procedure, and my mother died of blood poisoning. She was not quite 21 at the time.

My mother had a sister, Paula Moskovicova. She, like my mother, married a lawyer, some Mr. Bela Jakobovits. She moved away to Budapest to be with her husband. As a child I used to go visit them, and apparently Bela became so fond of me that he wanted to adopt me. His fate was tragic – hoods belonging to the local Fascist 'Arrow Crosses' [see Arrow Cross Party] 9 beat him to death during one of their anti-Semitic rampages in the street of Budapest for trying to protect some little old lady, a stranger, against their flails and truncheons. So my Aunt Paula was thus tragically widowed. Grandma Fany advised her daughter that she should move to Slovakia, that it would apparently be safer for here there. Unfortunately my aunt listened to her, found an apartment in Bratislava and registered with the local authorities using forged Aryan papers. Paula was a blonde, and didn't at all look Jewish, and so thought that she was finally safe. A neighbor lady, however, pegged her as a suspicious person, and informed on Paula to the Hlinka Guards. The Guardists came for her, beat her and forced her to confess. She was put on the next transport and the gas chamber in Birkenau took care of the rest.

Growing up

I was born in the year 1921 in Zilina. At the age of three I became a complete orphan. Because I became an orphan while still a baby, they found me a wet nurse, a single mother, some Miss Balazova, whose first name was the same as my poor mother's – Ilona. She apparently had enough milk to go around and loved me perhaps more than her own child. Many years after the war, a letter from some lady came to the radio station where I was working, in which she wrote that she had heard my name on the radio, and wanted to know if I'm the Lacinko who she had once nursed. She sent me a photo of me as a two-year-old little boy with my father – actually thanks to her I have my one and only reminder of my father. Ilona had married a police sergeant somewhere near the border of Slovakia and Moravia. I set out to see her. In order to surprise her, I didn't let her know ahead of time that I was intending to visit her. When I arrived, I met her husband, this man on crutches, who told me that she had died shortly before. He at least took me to her grave.

As a little boy I was probably a beautiful child, because I even won a beauty contest in Michalovce. When I was six, the town of Michalovce held a beauty pageant, someone entered me into it, and I won in the boys' category. In the girls' category the sister of one of my friends won, her name was Litzi Goldfingerova. Back then they took our picture and our photo was published in some literary magazine. I unfortunately don't have the photo; we lost everything during the war.

I grew up with my grandparents – partly the Porjeses took care of me, my father's parents in Zilina, where we spoke Slovak and German, and partly the Moskovics took care of me, my mother's parents in Michalovce, with whom I spoke the Zemplin dialect and Yiddish. The conditions in both families, as far as religion goes, were quite different. The Moskovics were Orthodox, while the Porjeses were Neolog Jews.

In Zilina, in my poor dead father's house, as a complete orphan I had a 'bona' – a governess. She was a German, a very devout Catholic, an old maid, who boasted twelve first names, of which I remember just five: Maria, Magdalena, Marta, Kristina, Luisa. She loved me dearly and bought me

toys from her pay. Grandpa Salamon and Grandma Julie had enough cares and worries with their ailing homestead and with five unwed daughters. Before his death my father had managed to marry off the other eight to decent men, but after his death the rest went to seed. And so my nanny Marie Magdalena brought me up according to her lights. She used to take me to a Catholic church, so I knew the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary and other prayers like a proper Catholic.

Both families, the Moskovics and the Porjeses, cooked kosher. There were separate dishes for dairy foods, separate dishes for meat, so as to keep it strictly separated. In Zilina it wasn't so strict, but in Michalovce my grandma made sure that everything was according to the rules, ritually pure. My grandparents in Zilina employed a cook, a Catholic girl named Hanka, who cooked excellent dishes. We ate traditional foods – during Passover matzot and also during other holidays, traditional foods. For Sabbath we also lit candles. Before eating we had in both families some Hebrew prayer, but today I don't remember these things at all. I also know that we had to eat everything, not a crumb was allowed go to waste. We attended the synagogue more in Michalovce. There at the age of 13 I had my bar mitzvah. What a celebration that was! However only Grandma Moskovicova survived the Shoah, and after the war completely lost any religious illusions she may have had. She took an intense dislike to kosher cuisine and stopped observing all rituals.

I liked to read a lot. My grandfather did occasionally give me a bit of money, but it wasn't enough to satisfy my appetite for reading. So I made an agreement with the soda shop owner, Mr. Klein, that I'd deliver bottles of soda pop after school with a wagon. For the deliveries, which each day took up two or three hours of my time, Mr. Klein gave me one crown plus a bottle of pop. I then used these earnings to buy detective stories, its was trashy writing published in booklets with names like 'Sherlock Holmes,' 'Nick Carter,' 'Tom Shark,' 'Joe Bangs,' 'Leon Clifton,' 'Charlie Chan,' 'Buffalo Bill' or 'Winnetou – The Red Gentleman.' I read them secretly by the light of a candle, because my grandparents in Zilina economized on electricity at home.

In my father's study there were these mahogany bookcases full of many beautiful books. There were legal texts, but also philosophical tracts by Spinoza, Kant and Schopenhauer, or political essays by Carl von Ossietzky and Kurt Tucholsky. Fiction and poetry from Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Schiller, Heine and Thomas Mann. Everything was in the original language as opposed to the Slovak and Hungarian that was used in my grandparents' homes. I had a governess though, so reading the originals gave me no problems. My knowledge of languages came in handy later in the camps as well, and even later in my career as a journalist and interpreter.

When I was older, I was allowed into my father's study, into which no one else was allowed aside from my grandma, grandpa and my aunts who did the cleaning there. I remember the leather chair and sofa, the dark furniture, black and white marble table clock, an 'Ehrbar' piano, 'Rosenthal' porcelain vases, and a huge seashell on the piano, in which one could constantly hear the roar of the sea. On the wall, in a gold frame, hung an oil painting by the Jewish painter Kaufmann depicting an argument between a rabbi and a priest. A charcoal drawing also hung there – a double portrait of my beautiful dark-eyed and dark-haired young mother, and my happily smiling, more than twenty years older father. The charcoal portrait was created by a noted Hungarian artist, whose name I've forgotten. I found nothing of these things after the war. Actually almost nothing – in the courtyard of our devastated home I found on a heap of garbage the damaged double portrait of my parents. It was all torn and in horrible shape. I couldn't save my father, but I at least had my mother's likeness restored. It's the only remembrance of my mother that I have. Of my father, I

actually have only one photograph, which was given to me years ago by my former wet nurse Ilona Balazova. I'm in the photo as a two year old boy, sitting on a rocking horse, with my handsome father standing beside me.

I don't know the exact dates of my parents' deaths. And that's why whenever I feel the need, I pray the 'kaddish of orphans.' Not regularly, simply when I've got an internal need, which lately is more and more often. It's the only prayer which I still more or less remember, I've also forgotten it a bit, so I've got this mnemonic aid. I've got it written in Hebrew, but because I've even forgotten the alphabet, a friend transcribed it into Latin letters the way it's pronounced. When I was small, I used to go with my grandparents or my aunts to the Jewish cemetery in Zilina to where my parents had their grave. That cemetery was destroyed during the war by Slovak Fascists, like all Jewish cemeteries. I think that in the last few years they've restored it, so I'm preparing to go there to have a look. Only my father and mother lie in that cemetery. The rest of my relatives are God knows where. During the Holocaust I lost 28 of my close relatives in Auschwitz, so I've actually got this private Yad Vashem 10.

In my mother's home town, in Michalovce, my parents decided that over the summer holidays they'd make a faithful Orthodox Jew out of me. I had to grow payes, I got a yarmulka for my head, and they put an under-tabard with fringes that stuck out over my short pants. They even hired me a private religion teacher. The first teacher was named Mordche; I mainly remember that he was constantly picking his nose. Despite this he taught me how to read Hebrew and some prayers. But he wasn't that successful, because I claimed that I couldn't see the small letters. He complained to my grandfather, who due to this sent me to an optometrist, where they found out that I really was nearsighted. So they prescribed me eyeglasses. My second teacher was younger, more educated and friendlier. He was named Broche, which in Hebrew means 'blessing.' I asked him once what it means to be a Jew. He answered, 'To be a Jew means to be a human being.'

After the summer holidays I returned to my grandparents in Zilina. Grandpa Salamon clasped his hands together and called out to my grandmother, 'Julinko, come see what kind of a monkey those Moskovics have made out of our Lacinko in the East!' He took my grandma's scissors out of her sewing machine, cut off my payes, threw out the yarmulka and tore off my tabard with fringes. He even confiscated my glasses, that I wasn't to make a fool of myself, and forbade me to move my arms while walking. I had to go for walks with him standing erect and with my arms at my sides. My grandfather simply couldn't deny his days of Austrian Army discipline.

I never took religion very seriously. My grandmother in Michalovce wanted me to attend cheder, but I refused. My grandfather convinced her to not force me, so I didn't have to go there. In Zilina I attended a so-called Neolog school, which is this Jewish orientation, which I would in short say takes nothing seriously. This Neolog school was of a very high quality, very good teachers taught here. They taught German here already during elementary school, the school was also attended by non-Jewish classmates. On Saturday we had the day off, on Sunday we had classes. High school I attended for a change in Michalovce. I did extremely well, I knew German perfectly from home, and from Zilina I also knew how to speak Slovak very well, which is something you couldn't say about my classmates and even some teachers. Because in Michalovce they speak with the Eastern Slovak Zemplin dialect.

I remember that once my classmates and I were playing Marias [a card game] during religion class. Our teacher, Mr. Ehlinger, a shammash, suddenly says, 'In Hungary the azesponem is Bela Kun 11, and in Michalovce the azesponem is Porjes!' 'Azesponem' in Yiddish means something like supreme smartass! Bela Kun was the chairman of the Hungarian Communist Party [KMP] 12, and a terror of all Jews. So in this witty fashion the shammash compared me via being a smartass to Bela Kun.

I remember walking down the street in Michalovce, and walking up to me comes my two and a half years younger classmate Spanar. He began calling me a smelly Jew. I grabbed him and drenched him in a puddle. It had just rained, so I really made a mess of him. When he came home, he evidently complained to his parents about me. However, his parents were very decent people, Protestants and opponents of Fascism. Mr. Spanar was a respected doctor. The Spanars came to our place the next day all dressed up in their Sunday best, along with their son, and proceeded to fervently apologize for their son's behavior.

But otherwise my high school studies took place in the idyllic conditions of the First [Czechoslovak] Republic 13. Still before official Fascism broke out, the Czech army temporarily occupied Slovakia, to prevent the Hungarian irredenta, forceful accession. The irredenta's color was green, which I didn't know at the time. By coincidence, that year I was in my last year of high school and had on my lapel a ribbon worn by alumni – green with a yellow border. The army patrols were made up of these uneducated young guys. When they saw me on the street with a green ribbon, they accused me of supporting the Hungarian irredenta, and jailed me overnight in the high school gym. My grandma and grandpa were frantic, they had no idea what had happened to me, and were understandably afraid for me. In the morning it was explained that a mistake had been made, they let me go, and some captain profusely apologized to my grandparents. I remember my grandmother saying to me, 'I hope that this was your last time in a pickle!' Poor thing, she'll never know how wrong she was back then!

It wasn't until our last year of school that we Jewish students realized how idyllic the times had been until then. Because we were finishing high school at a time when the subversive actions of the Hlinka supporters, also joined by a few of our less stellar classmates, were peaking. At school, in the hall we had a cloakroom that was protected by bars, where we used to change. Once in the winter, all of us Jewish 12th graders, there were eight of us in all, found that the buttons had been cut off of our coats. Nothing similar had happened to the rest of our twenty non-Jewish classmates. I was elected as the avenger. The next day I purposely came to school a little later, after the first class of the day had already started. I had equipped myself with a razor blade. I got into the cloakroom, which was empty because the rest of my classmates were already in class. I cut the buttons off the coats of all non-Jewish classmates. None of them complained, because they very well knew that they had done the same thing to us before. With this the first phase of anti-Semitic assaults ended.

The ideological leader of student Hlinka sympathizers was our Professor Hlavac, the catechist of Catholic religion. A second anti-Semite was our professor of Slovak, Konstantin Maco. In the tense atmosphere of the temporary occupation of Slovakia by a Czech division, the vindictiveness of these two professors against students of Jewish origin intensified to such a degree, that they secretly gave out the questions on the Slovak final exam to their anti-Semitic favorites, but kept the questions a secret from us Jews. The rest of the professors were mostly from Bohemia, and

certainly didn't sympathize with the Hlinka supporters – one of them, the German professor Frantisek Vymazal, also told me about his fascist Slovak colleagues' conspiracy. He however didn't know what the questions were, or how to get to them.

I thought up a plan: I assumed that the distributor of the questions would be the catechist's biggest favorite, my classmate Michal, who later, after Tiso's 'independent' state was declared, became a highly placed official in the Hlinka Party, HSLS 14. Once, when the 'nationalists' were on not all that covert illegal military training, I went to the apartment where Michal lived. His aunt opened the door. I told her that Michal had forgotten something and that I was supposed to bring it to him. She let me in, and I really did find the questions in his desk. I quickly copied them and then at home I wrote them out for all of my Jewish classmates. Michal found out from his aunt what had happened, he immediately realized it was me – because two of us in the class had glasses – I and one girl. Michal told our professor about it, but it was too late to rewrite the questions for the final exam. And so Professor Maco probably had to read while grating his teeth my final exam composition on the subject of 'Jesus Christ and The Love of Thy Neighbor.' He probably watched with similar feelings my appearance before the graduation committee. I managed everything perfectly, but Professor Maco was of a different opinion. He disqualified my graduation – it was his personal revenge for my undermining of his effort to prove the superiority of his militant minions.

During the war

After graduation I couldn't study due to the Nuremberg laws, and so I decided to go to Michalovce to apprentice as a locksmith. However, before I could finish, I was called up to the so-called Sixth Labor Battalion – as Tiso's 'Slovak State' had decided to resolve the problem of young Jews in two phases: firstly to use up their manpower to the last drop in labor camps, secondly to load them onto cattle wagons and entrust their final liquidation to a foreign territory, 'Generalgouvernement Polen,' its German protectors.

For the realization of the first phase, the regime created a special group, euphemistically named the 'Sixth Labor Battalion', under the leadership of the Minister of Defense, Ferdinand Catlos 15. It was a cover name for forced labor camps, which were under the command of the Ministry of Defense. So they dressed us in mothballed uniforms that they had dug up from back in the times of the Austro-Hungarian [KuK] Army 16. We got dark blue navy uniforms plus flat 'chef's' caps for our heads, so we looked really fantastic! Those born during the years 1919-1921 were drafted into the labor camps, which were strewn across the entire territory of Slovakia; there were about six branch camps in all. In total there were 1278 of us Jewish young men. This number was complemented by several hundred people from the years 1916-1918, who had been originally drafted into the Czechoslovak Army. After the creation of the pro-Fascist Slovak State, they were stripped of their rank, stripped of their green uniforms and together with us younger ones dressed in blue.

On 3rd October 1941 I entered Svaty Jur, which was a small town between Bratislava and Pezinok. The plan was that after some time we'd be included on a transport to concentration camps in German-occupied territory. In Svaty Jur we were housed in wooden barracks infested with ants and fleas, and were armed with picks and shovels. We were given a mess tin and a tin spoon instead of cutlery. There was one washroom, two latrines, and no source of potable running water. From the perspective of some sort of military discipline, it was basically a farce, because no one took it seriously.

The guards were Aryan non-commissioned officers, partly former convicts, partly people of weaker intellect, who weren't deemed by the authorities to be worthy of service in the regular Slovak army. One of the 'sergeants,' who had in civilian life been a soda factory owner, was a lunatic – he even had a permanently manned machine gun installed into the window of his camp quarters, aimed day and night at the wooden barracks of the 'sixth-battalioners,' because he was under the delusion that the Jews want to kill him. We of course weren't allowed to leave the camp, associate with the Aryan populace, we weren't allowed to reach any military rank, we were all designated with the title of 'laborer – Jew'. We weren't allowed any leave, the only exception being the death of an immediate family member or a court summons. However, even in these cases, we had to be accompanied on our leave by an Aryan guard, whom we had to pay in advance all expenses connected to the journey; and so if we didn't have the necessary means, we weren't granted a leave of absence.

The daily regime consisted of ten hours of toil for the Moravod Company, draining marshes. We were helping build the Sursky Canal by Svaty Jur. Our daily pay was one and a half crowns, which was just enough for a roll, soda pop and five cigarettes. In the evening we cleaned our muddied uniforms with steel brushes, which was forbidden as damaging of government-issue property, but it was much more effective and faster than washing it in icy water and government-issue soap for two crowns. The nights were half-filled with unrequited erotic dreams, with the other half being filled with furious scratching and futile catching of thousands of insatiable fleas that infested our cots. Occasionally our fitful sleep was augmented by nighttime alerts and assemblies or equipment checks.

This routine was interrupted in March of 1942 by some mail, which was delivered to our barracks. We were flooded by frantic letters from our girlfriends, that in two weeks transports with young girls would be sent off from their former domiciles to a German camp in the southern Polish town of Auschwitz. My girl, Riva Halperova, was also destined for this girls' transport, scheduled to leave from the Zemplin regional center of Michalovce. She was 19, she had attended home economics school in Uzhorod, and we had been going out together before I left for the labor camp. She was a beauty: jet-black hair, doe-like eyes, caressing lips, a slim figure, breasts just right, trim calves.

I was 20 years old and everyone told us that Rivka and I are a beautiful couple and that we're right for each other, by the small-town standards of those days they called it 'true love.' We went to the movies, our ears and calves burned, and as soon as the lights went out we'd grope each other. During evening walks we hugged and kissed, but didn't get any further than what's called 'petting.' Riva was from an Orthodox family and had to be home by 10pm at the latest. And now my love was writing me that she has to get on a transport to Auschwitz. Her mother wrote: 'Come here, please, as fast as possible. We've heard that girls destined for transport can be saved by marrying a soldier. Hurry up, the transport is leaving in 14 days. God bless you!' To her mother's letter, puckered by dried tears, Riva added three words: 'I love you!'

My friend Sasha Goldstein, nicknamed Kutzush, who had a similar problem as I, had an idea. His plan was ingenious; among the Aryan guards Kutzush had a friend, a fellow countryman, with whom he occasionally drank and played cards. This friend promised to lend him his green uniform for fifty crowns. For a hundred we bought forged travel orders with authentic stamps for us both. The plan was that I'd go in a blue Jewish uniform and Kutzush as an 'Aryan' would escort me in the green uniform. He'd let me off in Michalovce, and continue on alone to Presov, in three days we'd

both manage to get married, and then return together to Svaty Jur. I was ecstatic, scrounged up the necessary money and everything worked out to a T.

However, when Rivka's mother saw me, she wrung her hands in tears. For something unforeseeable had happened: the Ministry of the Interior had decided – apparently to prevent any eventual escapes from less guarded assembly points in smaller towns – to concentrate the girls in collection camps in Poprad and Bratislava, and from there transport them in cattle wagons to Auschwitz. So when I finally managed to arrive in Michalovce, Riva and the rest of the Michalovce girls had already been in the collection camp for three days. No weddings with members of the Sixth Labor Battalion took place. What took place were the funerals of their disconsolate parents. After a short time, Rivka's mother also died, of a heart attack – she thus saved herself from a more distressful trip to Auschwitz.

So I returned, disappointed, to Svaty Jur. I paid for my escape with fourteen days in jail with no supper. The punishment was surprisingly mild, because the command took the fact I had returned voluntarily after 48 hours as a mitigating circumstance. As far as Kutzush goes, he never returned to the camp, nor did they catch him. He survived the war with partisans in a bunker in the forest, after the war he became a hotel manager in Bratislava, and died in the 1980s.

With me in the Sixth Labor Battalion was Rafael Friedl, a musically and linguistically talented boy, who was a fervent Zionist. He managed to escape, and lived to see the liberation in a small Slovak town as the organist of a local Catholic church. Many years later I met him in Prague, where he was working as a diplomat for the state of Israel under the Hebrew name of Rafael ben Shalom. He asked me whether I wouldn't like to work for Simon Wiesenthal [17] as a 'Nazi hunter.' But I declined the offer. I wanted to start a new life. I wanted to forget all of those horrors. Of course, it's impossible to forget. Maybe forgive, but it's definitely impossible to forget. Another colleague of mine from Svaty Jura was Pavel Grunwald, an excellent skier. He was young, and so the transport from the Sixth Labor Battalion to the concentration camp could have missed him for another two years. But he didn't want to abandon his widowed mother, and voluntarily accompanied her to Auschwitz, where she died. He himself survived the Holocaust in the nearby Buna camp [18], he lived to be liberated by the Americans. But he died a few weeks later in their quarantine camp, of typhus.

I'd call my youth a time of constant escapes. Circumstances were to blame. To tell the truth, I ran away from wherever it was possible, or I at least tried to run away. Just from Svaty Jur I escaped twice. The second time I ran away was after they threatened us with transport to the Ukrainian front. There we were supposed to help the so-called Special Units of the Hlinka Guard, deployed side by side with the SS, to clear minefields. So at that time I became a deserter wanted by the police, because the Sixth Labor Battalion fell under the Ministry of Defense.

I arrived in Michalovce and fell ill, the head doctor at the Michalovce hospital, a staunch opponent of the Tiso regime, Zdenek Klenka, diagnosed me with pleurisy, and announced that I have to immediately go to the hospital. I couldn't go to the Michalovce hospital, because Dr. Klenka would have been informed on by his colleagues. So he sent me to a sanatorium in Bratislava. I don't know what exactly was written in the letter of recommendation, nor who arranged and paid my two-month stay in the sanatorium belonging to Dr. Sumbal, because I spent most of the time in bed with high fevers. I think that Grandma Fany arranged it through her Aryanizer, Pavol Hospodar.

Twice a day they drained pus from my chest with a cannula. Medicines and a urinal were brought, held and carried away again by a young, pretty Carmelite nun named Zita. I was terribly embarrassed in front of her because of that urinal, because I liked Zita. The fevers receded, my overall condition gradually improved, the professor was satisfied and 'threatened' to let me go home in a couple of weeks or so. Where 'home,' was of course the cardinal question, but in the meantime I wasn't concerning myself with that. Fourteen days was still a long time, especially when after long weeks of treatment and gradual 'revitalization,' some of my fellow patients in the room were beginning to really get on my nerves, apparently in the same measure that I was also getting on their nerves. But, as luck would have it, the tempo of my recovery apparently overtook the estimates of the esteemed professor himself. Because this embarrassing incident happened. Sister Zita was once again holding the urinal for me, and somehow my manhood unexpectedly welled up in me. Basically, though the urinal was still half empty, its orifice was suddenly filled. Zita was startled, in her terror let the urinal go and ran out of the hospital room in a panic. My more cynical fellow patients were guffawing until their bellies hurt, but I was quite mortified. Because shortly upon that, the head nurse burst into the room, in a snit, an older nurse along with an orderly. She bawled me out in an un-Christian fashion, that I'm a disgrace and lout, and that I'm apparently confusing the hospital with a brothel. I couldn't even imagine what words the chaste Zita had used to describe that faux-pas, but the Mother Superior's choice words sounded so comical in the context of the whole episode, that I burst out laughing, which understandably was the last straw in the whole affair. Mr. Professor Sumbal was however a worldly man, and likely had his own opinion on the whole matter, but in front of the head nurse he had to preserve decorum and called my behavior hooliganism. And because he apparently didn't want to make waves with the Carmelite order, he looked my case record over, stone-faced, in front of the head nun, and then told me that my condition had improved to the degree that I could leave his clinic in three days. I accepted the verdict in silence. When the professor and head nurse left, my elderly neighbor uttered a thought which hadn't even occurred to me, a naive country boy. "Yeah, sonny" – he said – "civilian nurses are quite a bit more expensive."
Sister Zita never again set foot in our room. The urinals were brought by a male orderly, who smirked at me, because news of the affair had already spread throughout the entire sanatorium. So that's how my stay at Professor Sumbal's clinic in Bratislava came to end; I've remained grateful to him my entire life. When I was leaving by the main entrance, I was still coughing a bit, but not wheezing. I sent Sister Zita a letter of thanks with a sincere apology. After the war I bought a large bouquet and took it to the clinic. A smallish, slightly chubby Carmelite that I didn't know took the flowers from me. "Sister Zita is no longer with us", she told me. "Where did she go?" I asked. The chubby nurse looked down. "She's left for a better world", she replied. "Two years ago already."
[quoted with the gracious permission of Ladislav Porjes from the manuscript of the yet unpublished book CENZUROVANY ZIVOT: Z pameti cesko-slovensko-zidovskeho reportera (A CENSORED LIFE: From the memoirs of a Czech-Slovak-Jewish Reporter)]

I lived in Bratislava on false Aryan papers. False papers were issued illegally by either Protestant or Greek Catholic priests who were against the Fascist regime. They helped Jews, issued them false birth certificates. I, however, set out for the Bratislava Jewish community. Sitting there were these two young guys, who took down my real birth data and told me to return in two hours. They left the date of birth, but changed my name to Po Irubsky and issued me a birth certificate and home certificate. They also gave me a document stating that I'd been operated on for phimosis, an infection of the foreskin, which was in case someone found out that I was circumcised, so that I'd

have a document stating why. They did everything for free, plus gave me a hundred crowns from a secret fund. They advised to not carry all of my papers together, so as to not be conspicuous. They also advised me that with my non-Aryan face, I should rather not even set foot outside. But I didn't take heed of their good advice, I thought that it couldn't be that dangerous, that I can't again look all that Jewish. Today I know how naive I was back then!

I found work through an ad – in the paper they wrote that some German Reich fruit preserves and jam company, with a branch plant in Bratislava, was looking for a German-Slovak translator. I set out for the address listed in the ad, introduced myself under my false name, and said that I was interested in the job. Some German was sitting in the office, he tested my translating abilities, and immediately hired me. I worked there twice a week, each time for about two or three hours. My salary was a thousand crowns a month – at that time the crown still had almost its pre-war value, so I came by some very decent money. Just for comparison: at the end of 1944, a can of excellent Italian sardines still cost one crown – so back then a thousand crowns was a very nice sum. It allowed me to rent an apartment in one villa in Bratislava, which was rented out by some widow. But I think that my German employer came to suspect something about my origin, because one time he says to me: 'It's interesting, that as opposed to you, Slovaks can't speak German very well.'

But what happened was that I was informed on by a former member of the Sixth Labor Battalion, who was in the pay of the Secret Police as an informer. He identified me as an escapee, found and denounced me to the Guardists. All of a sudden they caught me in the street, I defended myself and shouted what do they think they're doing, but they told me to shut up. They took me in and started interrogating me. I insisted that I was the person identified in my papers. They told me that if I'm claiming to be a Slovak, to take off my pants, so they could make sure that I'm not a Jew. I told them that it was pointless, that I had been operated on due to a foreskin infection. I got a cuff. They were yelling at me, that no Slovak would carry so many documents on him. Let alone a confirmation of surgery. They were right in that, my big mistake was that I hadn't listened to the warning at the Bratislava Jewish community, to never carry my papers all together. They beat me up and dragged me with other prisoners, in chains, through Bratislava. They stopped traffic and dragged us through the streets like animals. Those more sympathetic would stop and slip us chocolate or a fiver. So that's how I got into military prison in Poprad.

I had to hand in my documents, wallet, watch, pocket knife and comb. The guard was looking me over and asked, 'You're a Jew, huh? That's all we needed here!' In the warehouse I handed in my suit jacket, pants, trench coat, underwear, tie and shoes. I was given a standard-issue shirt, long linen underwear, a summer linen uniform and hard boots. They also gave me a tin bowl and spoon. They led me down a long, gloomy corridor with wet and mildewed walls. The building was perhaps from the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, by the looks of it, since the times of Maria Theresa nothing had changed here, or been aired out – the air was thick and dank. [Maria Theresa (1717–1780): Bohemian and Hungarian queen and Austrian archduchess from the year 1740. As the wife of Francis I. of Lorraine, Holy Roman Empress (from 1745).] A true, blue garrison prison. The cell was a large, cold room with a high window, barred of course. There were long benches along both walls and a massive, unfinished table. By another wall there were straw mattresses covered by blankets and in the corner an uncovered pail that stank horribly. My fellow prisoners consisted of thieves, rapists, deserters, the ill – all together we were about thirty men in the cell.

The prisoners would play ‘meat’ – a Gypsy stood with his butt bared and had to guess who of us hit him. According to the rules, they were supposed to hit him with their palms, but they had something like a bullwhip – the Gypsy screamed horribly in pain.

For supper I got hot black coffee with saccharin and cold peas. The Gypsy advised me to put the peas in the coffee, that I’ll at least heat them up – and what’s more, it’ll all mix together in my stomach anyways. After supper we laid down on the straw mattresses. There were thirty of us, but there were only twenty blankets, so we had to artfully arrange them so that we’d all be covered. At night that meant that when one turned, everyone had to turn with him, because otherwise we wouldn’t all fit under the blankets. It took me a while to get used to it. I got a few cuffs on the head from my fellow sleepers and then I got used to it. After a night like that, I would get up in the morning all stiff and sleepy. There were bedbugs everywhere, and the air was unbreathable due to the open pail and the peas we’d had for supper. Before breakfast I set out for the washroom – a longish, dirty room with several taps, from which ran just a dribble of icy water. I was cold; fall beneath the Tatras is nice and cold. For breakfast we’d get a slice of bread and chicory brew with bromine. After breakfast we talked about food, everyone described what he liked – dumplings, bacon, sausages, potatoes, cabbage stew or haluzsky with bryndza [something like potato gnocchi served with a creamy sheep cheese]. Then we reminisced about rum, slivovitz or borovicka. [Slivovitz is a typical Moravian plum distillate, considered by many to be the Moravian ‚national’ drink; Borovicka, or pine brandy, is a distillate from the berries of the black and red juniper tree, popular primarily in Slovakia.] Finally we talked about women; roughly, lecherously and without a whit of shame.

They summoned me to court, to tell me that as a military deserter from the Sixth Labor Battalion, who had de facto deserted from the army of the Slovak State during wartime, I’d serve seven months of hard time, which I’d have intensified by a twice-weekly fast and a hard bed. I appealed. The judge alerted me to the fact that if my appeal was turned down, they won’t include the two months I’d already spent in jail in the penalty. Which was exactly what I wanted – I was trying to stay in jail for as long as possible. Although it wasn’t at all a pleasant environment, it was still better than being sent by transport to an uncertain fate in a concentration camp. I got what I wanted: in Bratislava they extended my sentence by two months – so I had nine months of jail in front of me, but with the certainty that for nine months I’m protected from the transports. As I’d been sentenced to more than a half year, the escort drove me to the Bratislava jail. I was chained to the other men, the trip dragged on forever.

The central military jail in Bratislava was a modern, multi-story building. Upon admittance I once again received a faded linen jail uniform without buttons. The buttons were removed for safety reasons, because one inmate had removed the buttons, eaten them, and then had to be taken to the hospital. The long pants had no drawstring, so they tended to slip down. The prison shoes had no straps. That was because another inmate had hung himself with shoelaces and straps tied together. They even took my glasses, apparently so that I wouldn’t slit my veins with the lenses. They shaved me with a straight razor and a dull safety razor – reputedly to prevent lice.

I was put into solitary confinement – the cell was nice, a room three by two meters big. A concrete floor, barred window, a small stool, a folded-down iron bed. They didn’t give me a bowl or spoon, as someone had once upon a time used one to slit his wrists. My food was brought by an inmate, accompanied by a guard, in an aluminum mess tin. I got a wooden spoon, spinach, meat and piping

hot beef soup, which smelled fairly good. I put it in the toilet to cool off, and was looking forward to eating it in peace, finally for once like a civilized person. About five minutes later, when I was getting ready to begin eating the soup, the guard appeared again and yelled at me to return everything. He pushed me aside and carried away both bowls of food, still full. I remembered that, and the next time stuffed myself with hot potatoes, and burned my throat with boiling soup. There was no other way; otherwise I would have again gone hungry all day. Because we didn't get any supper. At night a bright light bulb in the ceiling shone constantly, and every little while the guard's eye watched me through the spy-hole in the door.

I communicated with the other inmates by tapping on the wall. They asked me whether I was receiving packages. Unfortunately I had no one to receive them from. They advised me that I've got the right to reading matter from the library and an extra blanket. The next day, when I asked the guard for something to read, he refused to give it to me. He gave me no reason why. I was shivering with cold and thought that I had a fever – but they also refused to give me an extra blanket. Again they didn't tell me why, although according to the prison rules I had a right to it all. In the morning I reported to the infirmary, that I'm not feeling well and have a fever. The doctor told me that there's nothing wrong with me, and sent me to take a walk out in the courtyard, under the watch of guards with pistols and truncheons. Out in the courtyard I fainted due to weakness. A guard repeatedly kicked me and forced me to do knee bends. When I fainted a second time, he gave me a thrashing with a bullwhip to wake me up.

In the evening a neighbor tapped out that I should complain about the rough treatment. But I knew that it was pointless – for I was the only Jew in the whole prison. I was forced to listen to abuse like 'stinky Jew-boy' or 'leech on the body of the Slovak nation.' Prison was very hard, I was no longer sure if I'd live through prison with my health intact. I remembered the advice that my fellow inmates in the Poprad garrison had given me. The most important thing was to get into the hospital. But getting into the hospital wasn't easy – a person really had to have some proper disease for them to send him there.

I remembered friends telling me to sew a piece of fat Sunday pork into my straw mattress, wait until it putrefied, and then eat it on an empty stomach. In this way I would reputedly give myself food poisoning or at least jaundice. I was really no longer capable of withstanding the bullying of the idiotic guards in the Bratislava prison, so I decided to try out this allegedly guaranteed recipe. I hid the meat and let it properly putrefy. To heighten the effect, I didn't eat for two days before consuming the fetid delicacy, just to be on the safe side. But apparently because I was already so starved, what happened was that I digested the reputed poison without any ill effects whatsoever.

Just when I was starting to become desperate, I remembered one incident that the Gypsy Mizo had been telling us about in the Poprad garrison. He'd been telling us that when he'd been in prison for the third time, one of his fellow prisoners got out of jail into the hospital with a case of the clap. We roared with laughter. How can we get a case of the clap, when there isn't even one woman here? Mizo didn't let himself be humiliated, and claimed that the guy had caught it himself. We didn't believe him. How could he give himself the clap? Mizo proclaimed that with soap. 'He made a plug out of soap, stuck it in his dick, didn't piss for two days, and the third day it swelled up, turned black, and ran like the Danube. The guard carted him off to the hospital.'

This anecdote now came back to me. I didn't put much faith in it, but I said to myself that perhaps Mizo couldn't have completely thought up the whole thing. He was too much of a primitive to think up something like that. I began to weigh the various pros and cons of a similar plan. The risks seemed to me to be minimal. If it didn't work out, I'd most likely get another kicking, no food or a couple of other disciplinary punishments. Some sort of burning sensation in my genitals seemed like a minor detail. I hoped that thanks to this childish experiment I'd at least get into the hospital.

I was alone in my cell, so I didn't have to perform the preparations or the procedure itself in front of anyone. The guard did come around to check on me every fifteen minutes through the peephole, but fifteen minute intervals were more than enough for the preparation and realization of the whole thing. I looked as if I was taking care of the more minor bodily function, as I stood with my legs apart above a Turkish toilet. There was therefore no way I could cause any suspicion. Everything proceeded exactly according to the recipe described by the Gypsy.

At four in the morning I reported to the infirmary. My privates, properly blackened, swollen and constantly dripping, hung limply from my half-drawn pants. The prison doctor examined my privates and said facetiously: 'Ignoramuses, animals, pigs, you could infect a whole girls' school!' He immediately diagnosed my problems as an acute case of chronic clap caused by gonorrheal microbes. He ordered a speedy transfer to the venereal disease ward at the army hospital in Ruzomberk.

Peace awaited me at the venereal ward in Ruzomberk. On the whole, they welcomed me kindly; in any case no one bullied me or called me a dirty Jew. Waiting for me were a clean bed, understanding looks and obliging colleagues who publicly offered me chocolate and cigarettes. When the nurse left, I even got a gulp from a bottle hidden under a mattress. It seemed to me like heaven on earth. The next day they took away a sample of my semen in a test tube, and then I could walk around the hospital park.

But the idyll lasted for only two days. For on the third day the attending physician – a young, sympathetic and intelligent-looking person – invited me into his office. He says to me, 'Tell me, what do you think we found in your sperm under the microscope?' It was clear to me that my days in the idyllic hospital atmosphere were numbered. Nevertheless, I smartly said, 'Of course I know, the clap!' The doctor smiled, 'We found two crowns' worth of government-issue soap. And now please take off your pants.' He carefully examined my organ, shrunken with fear. For a moment his gaze stopped at the circumcision cut. Then he quietly says, 'You're a Jew, aren't you? How much longer are you supposed to be in for?' I said that for five months more. The doctor says, 'That's quite a bit. And would it help you if we left you here for two or three weeks? We can't have you here for any longer, because a real cure for the clap doesn't last longer than that. Just to be sure you'll come see me twice a week, as if for a checkup, so that it doesn't look suspicious.' I thanked him from the bottom of my heart. Those three weeks in the Ruzomberk army hospital are my most pleasant memory of the six years that Tiso's Slovak State lasted.

I served the remainder of my sentence and was transported to the Sered [labor] camp 19, from which I was sent to Auschwitz. I vividly remember the transport from Sered to Auschwitz. We had a long journey ahead of us, the train started moving with an effort, the wagon was overfilled, and only with the greatest difficulty did I manage to get to a window. Then across many bodies I again squeezed my way back to my original place by a wall. I took a pack from my pocket and lit a

match. Flickeringly the flame lit up the wagon. Everywhere there was straw and people's bodies crammed together like sardines in a tin. Only a few lucky ones had the possibility of sitting, the rest stood crammed together. There were old and young ones, a young mother nursing a baby.

I looked at my neighbor Olda, we nodded at each other that the time was ripe. Olda pulled a loaf of bread from his backpack, broke it in half and pulled from the dough two small saws and a chisel. In the Sered camp the bakers had baked the tools into the bread for us, and the Piestany rabbi, who had been helping plan our escape in the camp, also gave us some money for the trip. Olda spoke to people in the wagon, that they shouldn't be afraid of anything, that it's night, the train is going slowly, the track isn't lit up, so no one would see us drill a hole in the wall with the saw and that we'd all be saved. The young mother protested, she was afraid for her tiny child, that she wouldn't be able to save herself and him during the escape and that both would lose their lives.

Olda consoled everyone, that the money from the rabbi would be enough for a start for everyone, that we'd get by somehow, and that after all escape a better choice that what was waiting for us at the end of the trip. People countered, that it's a big risk, the war could still last a long time and with our escape we could also endanger our other relatives. Suddenly out of the twilight a tall, emaciated figure appeared, an old man said that he's got a wife and children in Auschwitz and that he'd like to see them again. We agreed that we weren't forcing anyone, that whoever wants to escape can join up. Those that agreed to go were I, Olda, Michal and a young couple – a boy and girl, who were holding hands. Then a middle-aged lady joined us and the young mother with her baby.

We began cutting a hole in the wall with the saw. The work went slowly, the steel of the saw cut only slowly into the oaken wood, millimeter by millimeter. We young ones took turns; we tried to work as fast as possible, because we didn't know how far the next stop was. Our hands hurt, but the work proceeded slowly and surely. Suddenly a voice spoke up: 'Stop, I won't allow this. I've got a wife and child in a bunker and won't let myself be shot because of you. I want to see them again after the war. I you don't stop, I'll tell.' It was Markel, who the Germans had made commander of the wagon.

Olda gripped a knife in his hand and took a step towards Marek. The others stepped aside out of his way. Markel sank to his knees and pleaded with Olda to not kill him, that he's got a wife and children, all right, we can do what we want, that he won't tell. So we again began to saw at the wall. Suddenly in the distance the lights of a station were shining, brakes squealed – we were arriving at the Zilina train station. The door opened, an arm thrust a pail of water inside, a voice benevolently asked: 'Alles in Ordnung?' ['Everything OK?'] It was a decent person, a field constable from the former Austria, which was now called Ostmark. So there was nothing to be afraid of. When no one answered, the voice said: 'Na also, gute Nacht.' ['Well, goodnight then!'] With a grating sound the door began to slowly close. Everything looked hopeful. But suddenly a voice piped up from the depths of the dark wagon. It was Markel. 'Herr Kommandant! Es ist nicht alles in Ordnung.' ['Mr. Commander, actually things are not quite all right.'] The door opened again. Markel told him that there were people here that wanted to escape. He didn't want to reveal who. He said only, that it was dark, he didn't see anything, but he'd heard whispering and the sound of a saw drilling through the wall of the wagon.

Suddenly the wagon was surrounded by activity, a sharp whistle interrupted the quiet of night, everywhere around us were submachine guns. The baby began to loudly cry, everyone else's teeth were chattering with fright. One by one we had to get out of the wagon along with our meager luggage. The transport commander entered, examined the drilled-through wall and announced appreciatively that we had done a good job. He apparently had orders from above, that he's not to kill prisoners during the transport, what's more, shooting at night would have caused undesirable commotion in Zilina. He probably said to himself that the SS can get their hands dirty with us once we get there. He ordered the railway workers to disconnect the drilled-through wagon and move it to a spur line.

They loaded us onto a new wagon, a more modern one with a barred window and a sliding door with a heavy bar. They put it right after the first class wagon, where an armed escort was sitting. The door closed behind us and we heard the clanking of chains and a lock. The train started moving, but didn't get 30 km/h any more, they had doubled the speed, another locomotive was assisting from behind. We then passed through the stations without stopping. Utter silence reigned in the wagon. It wasn't dark any more, reflectors lit us up from both sides, and other lights aimed at the other wagons. We were so crammed against each other that you couldn't move. However in one corner by the wall there was room enough – standing there was Markel's figure, with a waxen face.

I remember the arrival in Auschwitz. They dumped us out of the transport, which stopped on a spur line. I did something wrong, I don't know anymore what it was, I didn't greet a member of the SS loudly enough, or something like that. That person gave me a horrible cuff, but that wasn't the worst – the worst was, that my glasses fell to the ground and broke. I was disconsolate, because I needed the glasses. I remember one older prisoner consoling me, perhaps between 20 and 25, who had already been in the camp for a longer time. He consoled me very much, was very kind to me, petted and kissed me. It wasn't until later that I noticed that he had a pink triangle: he was a homosexual.

The selection took place as soon as we arrived. They dumped us out, and then it went quickly, left, right, left, right, left, right, around and around. The standard tattooing also took place. An SS minion tattooed me a new identity: from that moment on I was 'Häftling Nummer B-14219.' I got into Camp B, so Auschwitz-Birkenau, right beside the former Gypsy camp, which they liquidated. Auschwitz had an underground movement, but I had arrived too late and was in the camp for too short a time to register the fact. Moreover, escapes, which for example Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler had managed [see Escape from Auschwitz] 20, those had happened long before I had arrived at the camp. The underground was founded by former French prisoners, whom the Germans had transported away.

In Birkenau about 40 of us men slept in a wooden bunkhouse, we slept under a ragged blanket. In the winter we heated a bit with a small stove. My typical day in the camp consisted of us waking up in the morning in the barracks and getting breakfast, which was made up of so-called tea, a slice of bread, accompanied by a teaspoon of artificial honey or artificial jam. That's what the Germans called breakfast, on this miserable ration we had to work until lunch. Lunch consisted of so-called 'zupa,' which was the Polish expression for 'Suppe' in German, soup. It looked like a broth made from dirty socks and tasted like it, too. Chunks of rotten boiled potatoes floated in it, here and there a piece of gristle, and with it again a slice of bread. On that we had to make it until supper,

which was weak, almost watery tea, a teaspoon of artificial jam and a slice of bread. I think that it's obvious why at that time I weighed 45 kilos.

One evening it was my turn to empty the garbage pail in our bunkhouse. The sun had long since set behind the barracks, and the twilight had thoroughly thickened. I aimed for a rusty barrel, into which I was supposed to dump the contents of our pail, and I noticed a half-limp sack leaning against the wall of the hovel that was called 'the kitchen.' When I was already returning to our bunkhouse with the empty pail, it was dark, no one could see me, so I decided to look at the contents of the sack. I hefted it and discovered that it could have been about ten kilos of potatoes, which moreover looked more or less edible. After three months in the camp I wasn't exactly in the greatest shape, but I grabbed the sack and after a bit of a struggle I threw it over my shoulder. With the pail in my other hand I carefully walked to our bunkhouse.

I was looking forward to my fellow prisoners cheering and how they'd praise me for such a scoop. But it was premature, because after a while a gang of about fifteen-year-old urchins came rushing over to me, threw me on the ground, stuffed their coat and shirt pockets with potatoes, and left me beaten on the ground. They were urchin children, whom the occupants had taken from their parents, who'd been accused of sabotage and as a warning publicly executed, from burned villages in the Ukraine and Russia. They then accused these children of vagrancy and begging, and dragged them to Birkenau. They stuffed them into the barracks of the former Gypsy camp, whose occupants they had gassed prior to that.

I picked myself up from the muddy ground, I was shaking with cold. I was so stunned by it, that aside from the empty pail, I was also dragging along the limp sack. I didn't think of the danger, I knew that my bunkhouse was around the corner, and the sack could come in handy as a blanket during the coming winter. Suddenly, out of the blue around the corner appeared a German guard, armed to the teeth. He asked me what I was doing outside. I explained to him that I had gone to empty the pail and that I had then fallen down, that's why I'm so muddy. He asked what the sack was for. I said that I had found it lying beside the garbage barrel.

He carefully took the sack into his hand, and unluckily, two forgotten potatoes rustled about in it. He wanted to know what had happened to the rest of the potatoes. I tried to explain that there had perhaps been some other ones in it, but that they had probably fallen out when I had fallen. He began to shout, that knowing Jews, I probably wanted to sell them somewhere, that I no doubt have some deal arranged. He ordered me: 'About left, ten steps forward, stop, about face, close your eyes!' So I did an about left, measured out ten steps, did an about face and again stood face to face with a machine gun. The SS soldier stood astride, aimed and fired a shot. It was a fragment of eternity. I managed to hear the shot, see the flash, feel a burning pain in my face, and find out that I'm alive. The SS soldier lowered his machine gun, aimed his flashlight's beam at my face, cursed and bellowed, 'Hau ab!' ['Get lost!'] I was in shock. I had obeyed the order. He didn't fire a second time, but just to be sure, I left the sack lying on the ground. In the bunkhouse everyone wanted to know what had happened, they'd been frightened by the shot. They treated the wound on my neck, which had by only a little missed my jugular.

I worked in a commando that went outside of the camp, and we built so-called cowsheds. I dragged long, heavy beams on my shoulders. One day the cowshed was built, the next day we tore it down – so this 'work' of ours was pure and utter bullying. I got sores on the back of my neck from

carrying the beams, I had a vitamin deficiency, and got into the infirmary. Working as the commander of the infirmary was some young German doctor with a war cross. Also working there was a very noted former Jewish professor from Prague, he treated me with several kinds of liniments; he gathered various herbs among the weeds, from which he then manufactured the liniments. He consoled me, that I won't go to the gas from the infirmary, because I was afraid that as a cripple who they don't need, they'll send me into the gas. This professor didn't return to Czechoslovakia after the war, I think that he left for America. Because he was probably afraid, because in Auschwitz he helped Mengele with experiments. Mengele likely forced him to do it under threat. Otherwise, though, he was a really esteemed and very capable specialist.

It was on the whole pleasant to lie in the 'Krankenrevier' [German for 'sick-bay'] for a couple of days, the infirmary may have been infested by insects, but one knew that the crematorium wasn't an immediate threat. It was warmer there, the soup was thicker, and occasionally one even found a piece of half-rotten potato in it instead of the obligatory peels. I could take a rest from the horrible toil, from the huge logs that we dragged around on our backs every day. I could stretch out under a not too clean, ragged blanket.

On the bed next to me laid a 'musulman,' a living skeleton that I couldn't tear my eyes away from, the poor wretch was constantly spewing blood. He was being given a morphine substitute, because real morphine was reserved only for the SS elites. In the gloom I could make out the number on his forearm – it had three digits, which means that he must have been in the camp for at least three years. The professor's efforts were futile: death was looking out of that poor wretch's eyes. Exitus was a question of at most several hours. The Latin word exitus has remained in my memory – I heard it for the first time from the professor in the infirmary. Today it doesn't sound so terrible to me, but back then, when the professor pronounced it in front of the head doctor, a cold sweat broke out on my forehead. There must be something very dignified in that word, because with its pronunciation even the SS-men themselves became quiet.

In the evening the attending supervisor used to come by, and it was time for a checkup. The German doctor usually examined the patients' bare feet, and when they weren't perfectly clean, the patient didn't get any supper. When the doctor approached my bed, I noticed that it was a new doctor, who I didn't know. I stuck my feet out from underneath the blanket. At that moment something rolled out onto the dirt floor. Inwardly I cursed myself for being so careless. Fear constricted my throat. For onto the floor had fallen several of my chessmen, which I'd made from bread dough. I did it to kill time in the infirmary. But of course it was forbidden. Absolutely everything was forbidden in Birkenau.

The SS doctor bent down and examined the figures with interest. He asked me whether I knew how to play chess. When I nodded yes, he wanted to know if I played well. Finally, he said that if I was able to walk, for me to get dressed and come with him. I went to his quarters. His batman stared in surprise, that the new doctor is bringing a kid to his place, what's more, a Jewish Häftling [German for 'prisoner']. The doctor took out a waxed canvas, unrolled it and took out some figures. He told me to sit down and put a pack of cigarettes beside me. They were gold-tipped 'Egyptians.' I took a drag from the cigarette and my head began to spin, so I put it down on the edge of the ashtray, so as not to dirty the carpet.

The game began. I opened very well, but the whole time I was asking myself: what will happen if I win. The doctor made a bad move and the game was from that moment decided in my favor. I said to myself, that he looks easygoing, that there's something decent in his eyes. But, I said to myself, weren't his party colleagues also smiling? Weren't they smiling during the selections? Weren't they even smiling when they were sending people to the gas chambers? Now the doctor wasn't even smiling any more. In his look there was something chilling. Is it worth irritating him? It wouldn't have been bad to show him what a bungler he is, it wouldn't have been bad to relish the feeling of victory, to show him that even an insignificant Jew-boy could defeat a member of the 'Herrenvolk' [German for 'master race'].

But I knew that that sort of victory could have a very bitter aftertaste. And I wanted to survive. So purposely I made a bad move. The doctor breathed a sigh of relief. I could still have saved the game, pulled my castle back for defense, I was even already reaching for it, but at the last moment I changed my mind after all. Instead I pulled back my queen and placed it so that the SS-man could develop an offensive. I let him win. He was delighted and declared that it hadn't been a bad game. In the end he gave me something wrapped up in newspaper. Outside I unwrapped the package. In it was a can of pork and ten cigarettes. Back at the infirmary I hid everything under my mattress. A few days later, as the professor had predicted, my sores really did disappear, and I was healthy again.

Miklos Feldmann, whom I knew, was also in Birkenau. His parents had a clothing store in Michalovce. His parents didn't have any musical talent, so who Miklos inherited it from is a mystery. He learned to play the violin wonderfully: he played at Jewish birthdays, weddings or other merry and also sad occasions. They brought him to Birkenau in a cattle wagon a year before me. When I met him there, he was 36, so 13 years older than me. He looked to be in good health, and as opposed to me, who wore prison rags, he wore a relatively decent civilian suit. Of course, he had a yellow square sewn on his back.

I wondered at it all, and he told me that it was all due to his violin, which he had taken with him on the transport. Mengele, who loved music, had on the ramp foresightedly let him keep it. From that time on Miklos played for the SS and officers, he played everything; from the classics to Lili Marlene [Editor's note: The song Lili Marlene was recorded by Marlene Dietrich (1901–1992): real name Maria Magdalene von Losch, German actress and chanteuse]. Everyone was thrilled and they promoted him – he became a capo [concentration camp inmate appointed by the SS to be in charge of a work gang]. However he never hurt anyone, and really no one wanted it of him either. His only duty was playing music.

After some time they brought him two 'Häftlinge,' to accompany Miklos's playing with singing. To increase their own fun, the SS truly picked them out cleverly: for they looked like Pat and Patachon. [Pat and Patachon: a comic Danish silent film duo. The part of Pat was played by Carl Schenstrom (1881–1942) and the part of Patachon by Harald Madsen (1890–1949).] Tall and skinny Ojzer had once been cantor in a Vilna synagogue. Short and stocky Lajb was from some Polish shtetl [village]. These two singers complemented each other well while singing, but otherwise didn't have much love for each other. The swore at each other, Lajb abused Ojzer for being religious and for observing religious regulations even in the camp, and that he ate only a slice of bread and potatoes baked on a stove. Lajb called Ojzer 'meshugge' [crazy] and 'amhoretz' [ignoramus]. Ojzer on the other hand called Lajb a 'shabesgoy' or 'mamzer.' The SS made them the butt of jokes and

riddles like: ‘Do you know, you Jew-boys, why you’ve always been inferior? Because they cut a piece off of you right after birth!’ or: ‘Farmers pulled a woman’s naked, drowned corpse from the Visla. We immediately recognized that she was a Jewess. How did you know? She smelled!’ but otherwise they treated them relatively well and didn’t even beat them.

One day Miklos appeared before his audience alone, and waited for Lajb and Ojzer to appear. But the officers were requesting a song about a prostitute who fell in love with a soldier, for the popular hit by the Swedish-German Nazi star Zarah Leander [Leander, Zarah (1907–1981): Swedish actress]. Miklos summoned the courage to ask whether they didn’t want to wait for his colleagues, that after all, the song would sound better with singing. ‘Go ahead and play it yourself, Paganini [Paganini, Nicolo (1782–1840): Italian violinist and composer]. From now on you’ll always be playing solo! Your friends went up the chimney. There were punished for preparing to steal a loaf of bread.’ The violin dropped from Miklos’s hands and tears welled up in his eyes. A German consoled him, ‘Don’t be sorry, your favorite didn’t end as badly.’ Miklos summoned his last hopes and asked him whether thus little Lajb had remained alive. The SS soldier laughed, ‘No, not that, but the tall guy burned for a lot longer!’ This was what Birkenau ‘humor’ was like. The virtuoso Miklos Feldmann survived the Holocaust, and after the war immigrated to the USA, where he died.

In November 1944 word spread throughout the camp that an evacuation of the camp was being prepared – people whispered it while building the cowsheds, it was talked about quietly at meetings in the latrine, and more loudly in the barracks. It was no secret, and our ‘Blockältester’ [person in charge of one barrack, or ‘block’] Willy tolerated these debates. The Russian army was already damned close and cannon fire could even be heard, although still only occasionally and dimly, during assemblies on the ‘Appellplatz’ [roll call area]. Moreover, there were substantially more heavy freight trucks with carefully covered beds daily leaving the camp.

One ‘Häftling,’ a clerk from the ‘Schreibstube’ [camp office], brought allegedly guaranteed information that in the near future, they were preparing to evacuate the entire camp from Auschwitz to Gleiwitz 21. This news evoked agitation and fear among the inmates. It was clear to us that they wouldn’t be moving us by car or by rail, but that we’d have to go on foot in the bitter, freezing cold for dozens of kilometers in worn out boots and wooden shoes and summer camp rags. Prior to that, as a cover-up, they tore down two crematoria, which was supposed to fool the awaited visit of the International Red Cross – so we could hope that they wouldn’t shoot us en masse, as it would have cost too much work and ammunition, and the orphaned ovens of the last crematorium could scarcely have sufficed to do away with the evidence of mass murder.

Into this atmosphere came an unexpected roll-call of a surprising nature – instead of the routine bullying on the frozen terrain, came an unusual request by the SS ‘Scharführer’ [squad leader] for all prisoners up to the age of 40 who have some manual trade qualification to report. The first reaction was overall silence, we recalled similar requests from the past, which ended with the cleaning of latrines or SS barracks. But then, almost telepathically, prevailed a hope that these masters of our destiny – face to face with the transfer of experienced tradesmen to the Russian front – could mean it seriously this time. And so the first arms started to be shyly raised, among them mine and that of my friend Honza Buxbaum. For both of us, thanks to Tiso’s Slovak State, had been prevented from continuing our studies, and so we were forced to become ‘tradesmen,’ Honza became a tinsmith, I apprenticed as a locksmith. Roughly fifty of us reported. When we found out that we were truly to be driven away on trucks to a German munitions factory somewhere near

Gleiwitz, Honza and I agreed for all eventualities on possible escape scenarios.

Early one November evening, all adepts of the motorized transfer were issued a half-kilo can of meat from the army supplies and a loaf of bread of the same weight. They even entrusted each one of us with a tin spoon, and with typically German attention to detail added a miniscule can opener. Only drinking water was forgotten, despite their diligence. Or was it caused by a shortage of bottles? God knows. They were in a hurry, they didn't even test our alleged specializations. When it got dark, they brought over two trucks with their beds covered with heavy waterproof canvas. 'Los, los' [German for 'come on, let's get moving'] – the SS on the left and the capos on the right, they drove us up ladders towards an uncertain future. Inside were long wooden benches on both sides of the truck bed. Honza and I quickly agreed that we'd be among the last to get on the second truck. When we climbed up and sat down, we found ourselves face to face with an SS-man with a hand reflector and a machine gun on his lap. We then waited for another hour in the utter darkness, and then both trucks set off on their nighttime journey.

The drivers turned on only the parking lights, as they were afraid of Russian fighter plane scouts. Due to camouflage our guard also turned his hand reflector on only occasionally, mutedly and briefly. After a long, jarring ride hope began to dawn – our guard began to doze off. In suspense we watched the intervals of the SS-man's slumber increasing. Already we could count it in seconds. Finally Honza, who was sitting right at the edge of the truck bed, nudged me with his elbow and jumped out. I let myself down a little more carefully, right after him. Though the sound of us hitting the ground was muffled by the roar of the exhaust, it was enough for our guard to finally wake up. He immediately began shooting blindly and even turned on his searchlight. We laid down to blend in with the nighttime terrain. The SS-man was probably afraid that if he stopped and began searching the surroundings, more prisoners would escape. After a while the shooting stopped and the reflector shut off. For the time being our escape was a success.

We could have set out on the way back, in the opposite direction, from which the muffled sound of cannon fire could be heard. But we had neither a map nor compass, we didn't know the countryside, nor the right direction to our goal. Our goal was to meet up with advance Soviet tanks and scouts, which by the volleys of cannon, rifle and machine gun fire couldn't have been far off. Upon our first few steps we realized that we were on a frozen, still unharvested field covered by rotted stalks of wheat. The field was covered by high weeds, which made walking more difficult, but at the same time afforded careful progress at night and during the day a more or less unnoticeable hiding place when lying down.

We went on like this for three days. After that the supplies we'd been issued were exhausted, even though we had been eating from them truly modestly and been slaking our thirst by licking hoar-frost. Neither did the freezing nights contribute to the renewal of the remnants of our even so modest strength. But despite that, neither of us thought of seeking help in the farm buildings we sensed to be in the vicinity. The virulent anti-Semitism of Polish farmers and their active participation in anti-Jewish pogroms before the war was too notorious for that temptation. No less cautionary was also information in the camp, that it was the farmers that had returned to the Germans, Jewish prisoners who had managed to surmount the high-voltage obstacles. Of course, there were also those, of all things bigoted Catholics, who had hidden refugees from the liquidation commandos of their SS pursuers. Luckily in this case I was able avoid at least this dilemma.

At the dawn of the fourth day of our escape, during the three preceding nights we could have walked at the most several dozen kilometers, we were alarmed in our thistly hiding place by a warning shout “Hands up, or I’ll shoot!” Luckily our fright didn’t last long, because we immediately realized that the command wasn’t given in German, but in for us so sweet-sounding Russian. We stood, ragged and pitiful, face to face with two Soviet spies. While they were aiming their machine guns at us, they were also unbelievingly and mainly suspiciously staring at our hitherto unfamiliar striped “uniforms.” Though both Russians hadn’t yet seen a “Häftling,” they did have their experiences with SS scoundrels, disguised in all manner of things from farmer’s shirts to prison uniforms. That’s also why they at first didn’t believe our clothing, nor our Russian and painstaking accents, gained more from fellow Soviet prisoners in the camp than from the last two years of academic high school. They even hesitated when they saw the numbers tattooed on our forearms, and searched for another compulsory SS blood type tattoo, even under our arms. Only when they didn’t find them, and felt our emaciated skeletons, did they hang their machine guns on their shoulders, made a fire and offered us bread with speck and rolled ham from an opened can.

They didn’t understand how we could refuse such delicacies, which they had plenty of. They didn’t understand, until we explained it to them, that such greasy food after our long-term camp diet would have killed us, and were satisfied with only dry bread. But when with the same excuse we also refused a glass of vodka, both scouts again raised their weapons and under a God knows how seriously meant threat of shooting forced us to swallow the requisite dose of their firewater. I dare say that it’s not necessary to describe what it in that moment did to us. Luckily they supported us and led us stumbling to a relatively nearby grove, where several artfully camouflaged tanks and trucks stood. [quoted with the gracious permission of Ladislav Porjes from the manuscript of the yet unpublished book CENZUROVANY ZIVOT: Z pameti cesko-slovensko-zidovskeho reportera (A CENSORED LIFE: From the memoirs of a Czech-Slovak-Jewish Reporter)]

Some gray-haired commander invited us into his sod hut, offered us tea and biscuits, a dark cigarette and white bread and easy to digest salami. He offered us old, but carefully patched, and mainly clean army shirts. We spent the night in the sod hut, and the next day at our wishes the captain had us driven to the recruitment center of the First Reserve Regiment, the so-called Svoboda’s Army 22 in Krosna. The driver, a smiling young sergeant-major, put us in a vehicle of uncertain make. In response to our query, he informed us that that it was a vehicle put together from various parts collected from crashed German, Soviet and even American vehicles that had been lying around by the roadsides. Surprisingly, this vehicle got us to our desired destination.

The office was decorated by a Czechoslovak flag, a pretty female sergeant took us to see the recruitment center officer. The officer listened to our request to wear the uniform of Svoboda’s Army, but he sent us to the infirmary for a checkup. There they examined us, measured our blood pressure, EKG, did blood samples, fed us for two weeks and then once again gave us back to the recruitment center. There they told me that I hadn’t yet reached the compulsory ‘minimum’ of 50 kilograms, and therefore couldn’t yet bear arms. When they saw how disappointed I was, they at least gave me a uniform to wear. Then, when they found out that I knew several foreign languages, plus Yiddish and also Russian, which I had learned in the camps, they sent me to Krakow to the Allied American-Soviet-British military mission. There I served for the next several months as a translator and interpreter during the interrogation of captured German officers, or disoriented liberated prisoners.

So I served at the Allied Military Command in Krakow. Here, sometime in March of 1945, I had an interesting thing happen to me. Major Abramov asked me, ‘Bist a Jid?’ [German for “Are you a Jew?’]. There were several of us sitting around a table, I was taking my time in admitting it, deep down in me the news of atrocities in Stalinist Gulags 23 and Ukrainian ghettoes were still resonating. I wasn’t sure what Major Abramov was like, nevertheless I risked it and admitted that I’m a Jew. He laughed, and pulled a full bottle and a half a cake out of a drawer. He said, ‘One more. Don’t worry, I’m also a Jew.’ And passed me a glass of vodka.

The major and I sat and talked late into the evening, whereupon he left with his colleagues for their barracks, taken over from the Germans. I was however a bit wobbly after such a quantity of alcohol, to which I had grown unused during the war years. I aimed for the former Polish branch of the international women’s organization YWCA [Young Women’s Christian Association], where I lived. I’ve always had a terrible sense of direction, so after an hour of weaving through the badly-lit streets of Krakow I found that I was definitely lost. But hope gleaned, I glimpsed a strip of light blinking through a window cranny of some basement dwelling. I knocked on the badly sealed, dirty window.

Underground a commotion broke out, after a long while I heard shuffling footsteps and the basement door opened a crack. By the light of a candle appeared a wrinkled, bearded face. The old man heard me out and gestured for me to come on in. Inside the basement confusion ensued, there were about a half dozen women there, young and old, emaciated and dressed in ragged remnants of prison garb. The old man introduced himself as Smul, and told me that I should stay overnight at his place, as my lodgings were at the opposite end of town. The women were his daughters and friends that had by miracle survived the Holocaust in several scattered camps. I got the best straw mattress, they fed me bread and garlic, I told the story of my own journey through the camps, and went to sleep. In the morning something moist on my left hand woke me up. Sleepily I turned around and saw my host kneeling beside my mattress and kissing my hand. I tied into him, ‘What the hell are you up to, I’m not a woman?!’ Smul refused to let go of my hand and whispered, ‘Don’t drive me away, sir, you’re God’s person, and I plead with you to bless me and my family and friends!’ I scolded him, why was he blaspheming so. ‘Yes, yes, it was the hand of God. While you were sleeping at my place, terrorists blew up your dormitory. Everyone who was sleeping there is dead. Only you alone remained alive!’

As I’ve already mentioned, at the Krakow command I met and befriended the Russian major, Abramov. His wife and daughter died during the barbaric bombing of Leningrad by the Nazis. Abramov was supplying me with black Russian army chocolate and cigarettes. In April of 1945 he helped me get onto a Soviet truck heading to Czechoslovakia. It was loaded with barrels of diesel and was headed for Dukla 24. I tried to convince the driver that it’s safer to take another Slovak pass – Lupkov. But the driver insisted that orders were orders. He sat me on the truck bed among the iron barrels and threw a dirty army blanket over me. The road was almost impassable, pothole followed pothole and many shallowly buried mines. I was bruised from the barrels, and one piece of shrapnel hit the hind portion of my body. To put it exactly and plainly: my butt was unusable for some time.

So I traveled through Dukla in the uniform of a non-com in the so-called Svoboda Army, but didn’t fire even a shot. But I was wounded. As a presumed hero, in Kosice the presidium of Gottwald’s 25 first post-war government entrusted me with an ‘important’ position. I became an advisor to the

Minister of Health, Surgeon-General Prochazka 26. Though he was a purebred Aryan, because of his large, somewhat atypical nose, they nicknamed him Porges. Some malicious joker then spread a witty saying: ‘Porges chose as his assistant, who else but Porjes!’ My ‘heroics’ at Dukla also had a funny conclusion sixty years after the war. In 2005, on the anniversary of our country’s liberation, I received a colored plaque in the mail. It was sent to me by the Central Council of the ‘Union of Officers and Warrant Officers’ of the Czechoslovak Army, and with it granted me membership for ‘participation in the battles at Dukla for the liberation for Czechoslovakia from the Nazis.’ So I became a hero, and that without even firing a shot!

After a few months they sent me from Kosice for ideological education at a school for educational officers in Turciansky Svaty Martin. I attended school along with our later colonels and generals – who were later reclassified as traitors and political prisoners – like for example Koval, Kopold, Machac and a number of others. Our accommodations were meager, we slept on the floor in an unheated gymnasium. Once when I was walking about the town, I discovered and reported the practically professional denouncer of Slovak Jews, Dr. Milan Grantner, who had denounced me to the police when I had been living on false Aryan ID during the war. He however wasn’t even put on trial. For he claimed that he’d never heard of Zyklon B [a highly poisonous insecticide used by the Nazis to kill Jews en masse in concentration camps], what’s more, that he had two school-age children at home. His only punishment was that people painted swastikas on his garage door.

After the course was finished I transferred from Svaty Martin to the personnel of the OBZ – Division of Army Intelligence in Kromeriz in Moravia. There I helped to unmask war criminals that had hidden themselves behind Czechoslovak uniforms. The first one that I unmasked was Koloman Rosko, who had put on a uniform of the Svoboda Army. I discovered him in the audience at a soccer game between the local Slavia team with Spartak Hulin. Koloman Rosko had been the commander of the special Jew-beating ‘Emergency Hlinka Guards’ in Michalovce, where my late mother was from. What’s more, he was also an officer of the so-called ‘rapid division,’ which valiantly participated along the side of the SS at the Ukrainian front. This swine, among other things, beat unconscious and then half-dead dragged to a hay-wagon aiming for the Auschwitz transport assembly area my 96-year-old great-grandmother, Mina Weissova. Though the fiend Rosko was convicted by a summary tribunal after the war, he ended up all right – thanks to the mafia protection of reeducated fascists, he only served two years working in a quarry!

Another of my victims was the police commander Michal Zidor, who in the western Slovakian town of Topolcany queued up local and regional Jews marked for transport to the gas chambers. Nothing happened to him after his unmasking either. He did lose his uniform and rank, but his former Guardist pals helped him get a well-paid job as a head clerk at a brewery.

From Kromeriz I moved to Litomerice. There I in particular participated in the hunt for Hitler’s orphaned youth, named the ‘Wehrwolf.’ At night they would illegally cross the at that time still sparsely guarded borders, and torch or burgle houses. With wicks and incendiary weapons they terrorized and even killed local citizens – especially old men, women and children. Once we tried out on them a method that the SS in Auschwitz had used to terrify us. We stood a captured ‘Wehrwolf’ blindfolded against a wall, one of us stood behind him and hit him in the head with a stick. While at the same time another one of us fired a salvo into the air from a machine gun. The ‘Wehrwolf’ thought he was already in the Valhalla of his Germanic heroes. In reality nothing happened to him, he just dropped a load in his pants. In Literomice in those days there were still

partial garrisons of not only Russians, but also Americans. During one joint dance party in a local hall, a Russian soldier shot an American in a fit of jealousy over some young local slut. Whereupon the idiot Russian then shot himself in the chest with his service revolver. I drove the wounded American lieutenant to the hospital in a borrowed jeep. Luckily both the Russian and American survived.

After the war

To tell you the truth, I had had it up to here with the army. I wanted to start my own life. I wanted to take German Studies at university, which I hadn't been able to do after graduation from high school due to the Nuremberg Laws. My request to be discharged from the army was granted. I left for Prague and managed to apply for the Faculty of Philosophy at Charles University. I was still wearing my uniform, because I hadn't had the time to find civilian clothes. But after my arrival in Prague, one more unwanted goodbye to the army still awaited me – two days after my arrival, they unexpectedly, and actually illegally, called me up into some honorary unit, which was supposed to present itself to the officials of the government and Party at the time. Directly in front of our unit, on a wooden tribunal, sat the Minister of Information, Vaclav Kopecky 27. Back then I wasn't as hard of hearing as I am now, and so I heard exactly what he was saying to his son: 'See, Ivanek, those are our heroes.' But then he paused, stood up, came a bit closer, had a better look at us, and says to the Minister of the Interior, Nosek 28, who was standing next to him: 'Quite the sight, huh? Jew-boys everywhere again!' Unfortunately I later heard similar utterances many times.

After the war, at a gathering in Prague organized by the International Federation of Students, I met in the crowd my former first love, Riva Halperova, because of whom I had deserted from the Sixth Labor Battalion in Svaty Jur, in order to marry her and so save her from the transport to Auschwitz. She waved at me, I didn't immediately recognize her. She was very skinny, her raven hair was streaked with strands of white, the years spent in Auschwitz had visibly marked her. We embraced each other and kissed. She had applied to the University of Political and Social Sciences.
We had a lot to talk about. At that time I was renting a place in Vaclavska Street beside Karlovo Namesti [Charles Square], and we remained together until morning. But aside from the introductory kiss at the student gathering, no other intimacy happened between us. Riva resolutely refused all my attempts, and not that they were few. She spoke, the words streamed out of her, but I was struck dumb in horror. She had survived Auschwitz, was one of ten, one of that one percent of that first transport of young Slovak Jewesses, who had stayed alive. But at what price! She was saved by a Blockältester with a green triangle, a former murderer, who brutally raped her, a virgin, and then passed over to a member of the SS. "He promoted me to capo in the women's camp – continued Riva, but before that he had his friend, an SS doctor, sterilize me so that I wouldn't become pregnant. And then passed me further on to his friends for sexual orgies. Occasionally I got a present for it, some women's underwear in decent condition, a loaf of bread, a can of meat, some cookies, a packet of coffee, or even a small pack of cigarettes. I shared the food and smokes with the women in my blockhouse, the underwear I usually kept for myself. I know what you're thinking now: you're thinking that I'm a whore, that I'm a hyena, that they pulled the underwear from some girl who then went up the chimney. But tell me, would it have perhaps been better if it had been worn by some Germanic Brunhilda? In the Lebensborn? [Lebensborn means "spring of life". The "Lebensborn" project was one of the most secret and terrifying Nazi projects. Heinrich Himmler created The "Lebensborn" on 12th December 1935. The goal of this society

("Registered Society Lebensborn - Lebensborn Eingetragener Verein") was to offer to young girls "racially pure" the possibility to give birth to a child in secret. The child was then given to the SS organization which took in charge his "education" and adoption.] After all, the girls in the barracks rooted for me, even though behind my back they said that I was an ordinary SS mattress." For me to please not be angry, but that from that time she hadn't had any relationship with anyone, and even now can't even think of physical contact. "Please understand – she cried desperately – I'm absolutely parched, physically and spiritually!" She assured me that as a capo she had always behaved decently, that she's also got it in writing from several of her fellow prisoners, but despite that, just in case, she had changed her name. She's now named Holubova, and that she'll most likely end her studies prematurely, she wants to move to the USA, her uncle on her mother's side had already sent her an affidavit. Her father had died in a camp, her mother of a heart attack after being dragged off to Sered.

Then I lost track of Riva and nor did I finish my Germanic studies. I couldn't properly concentrate on school, and so after three semesters I decided to be a journalist. After a short spell in the so-called radio-services of Rude Pravo 29 in Prague and after temporary stints in Kosice and in Bratislava, I became the head of the Prague office of "Pravda" 30, from which I was then fired during the time of the trials of Rudolf Slansky and et. al. [see Slansky trial] 31 as an alleged Zionist and cosmopolitan. After three years of degradation as hotel doorman the Party kind-heartedly "rehabilitated" me and sent me to work in the radio. There I worked as a shift worker in the news department, later as a commentator and finally as a foreign correspondent. At first as a "flying" reporter in socialist, later also in Scandinavian countries. Then longest of all as a local correspondent in Germany, especially in the former NDR and in West Berlin, but also occasionally in Bonn. From there, after the Soviet occupation in August of 1968, as a supporter of Dubcek 32 I was for the third time, this time definitively, existentially obliterated.

Still before I was permanently recalled to Prague, thrown out of the radio and then worked as a warehouse laborer until my disability pension, my colleague friends dispatched me from the West Berlin Tempelhof Airport to Belgrade. I was to discuss with my friends who were ministers of our government in exile the question of what we should do in this new situation, whether we should return to the mess back home, or remain in exile. The deputy premier, the "father" of economic reforms, Ota Sik 33 proposed that I accompany him in emigration to Switzerland, as a sort of personal secretary, today one would probably say a public relations manager. I turned it down. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of our government in exile, Dr. Jiri Hajek 34, revealed to me that he himself, despite the certainty of sanctions, was going to return to Prague, and advised me to do the same, as I had a family there.

During our conversation we came upon the question of what punishment awaited us for our "counter-revolutionary" activities. I stated my experiences. "When they got rid of me the first time, during the era of the trials in the 1950s, it took almost three years before they deigned to rehabilitate me. This time the comrades in the Central Committee will be twice as smart, so they'll shunt us aside for around five or six years." Jiri Hajek, an expert in international and socialist law at home and abroad, had a more skeptical opinion. "No way – he said – it's going to take much, much longer." But why?, I argued back, after all, we didn't do anything illegal?! The distinguished professor just sadly nodded his head: "That's exactly why!".

While I was in Belgrade, I took the opportunity to also visit my former “comrade-in-arms” from the Sixth Labor Battalion, JUDr. Ladislav Katuscak, who was working as general consul here, and was helping emigrants from the CSSR with advice and also financial assistance however he could. After his return to Prague, he was likewise thrown out of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He’d been informed of my stay in the Yugoslavian metropolis, and he invited me over for dinner and a longer conversation. “I almost forgot – he said to me – but this morning some fairly good-looking, elegant American woman was here asking about you. I told her that you’re living in the Hotel Metropol, I hope you won’t hold it against me. She told me that her name is, L.K. riffled through his planner – Reviva Haggling, and that she’s from New York”. It didn’t strike a bell.

I returned to the Metropol and the receptionist gave me, along with my key and a conspiratorial smile, a message written in Czech. “I’ll come in the evening at ten. Wait for me in your room. Kisses Riva.” Exactly on the indicated hour appeared a super-elegant dame laden with jewelry and a mink throw, a cigarette in an amber holder in ruby red lips, and otherwise also too made up for words. Basically a demimondaine. I stared at her, I would never have recognized her on the street, and even now I didn’t recognize her. She was alien to me, not only in her behavior and face, but also in her figure. Her once small and graceful breasts and behind were bulging, apparently due to plastic surgery. From a crocodile skin bag she took out a bottle of good whisky and two silver shot glasses, spoke with a strong American accent, and dismissed my astonishment with a slangy “What’re ya starin’ at, I’m loaded. This outfit is from Balenciaga.”

When I asked her how she had actually found me, she took out a folded clipping from the New York Times. The paper’s Berlin correspondent, referring to “the usual dependable source” announced that the Prague radio correspondent Mr. Ladislav Porjes had departed from the Tempelhof airport for Belgrade, apparently intending to emigrate. Not only could I not manage even a word, but not even a welcoming gesture. After a toast Riva, actually now Reviva, threw herself without words around my neck and covered me in kisses. Then she handed me a perfumed handkerchief, so I could wipe off the deposit of lipstick, and words describing her new story began pouring out of her. It wasn’t nearly as dramatic and drastic as the Auschwitz one, but rather much more banal and disgusting.

She had been working as a hostess at some charity ball in New York, and met a somewhat elderly and corpulent, already four times divorced millionaire. “I helped it along a bit, and he fell in love with me, supposedly at first sight, the disgusting old geezer”, she boasted openly. “My friends told me that he’s loaded, and so already on the dance floor I let him grope me and then rape me in his apartment. I guess he really liked it, and so a week later he married me”, she laughed cynically. And then out of Reviva spilled a flood of more and more disgusting details. The husband turned out to be an untreated syphilitic and pervert, whose refined sexual predilections apparently far outstripped the primitive swinishness off the Auschwitz SS. As she described everything to me, without a speck of shame, she began to slowly undress. And when I retreated, mortified, she threw herself at me and with brazen laughter clarified things: “Don’t worry, I’m not infected, my BWR is completely negative.’ Then she explained to me that BWR is short for Bordet-Wasserman Reaction, a special test used to determine if the patient is infected with syphilis or not. Despite all assurances and insistence, it was for a change I who had neither the desire nor courage for any hanky-panky with my former teenage love. And neither did I find it in myself even when we spent the night together in bed.

My distaste, and as she during the night repeatedly convinced herself, also inability, could however apparently not discourage Reviva. She even proposed that I marry her. When I objected that she was after all married, and clarified that I myself had already been married for over ten years and was the father of two school-age children, she dismissed such petty arguments with a wave of her hand. “After all, today divorce is just a mere routine matter – she rationalized – mine took only three hours. The court recognized my arguments, that life with a perverted and what’s more untreated syphilitic is an unjustifiable risk, and I got not only a divorce, but a luxury yacht and one and a half million dollars in damages. So admit it, I’m a good catch. And what’s more, I never stopped loving you.” And after a brief pause, she added in a somewhat more subdued fashion: “Your problem is that even though otherwise you’ve got a sense of humor, in the end you do take life too seriously!” After that we had breakfast together and kissed each other goodbye. Then she left. When I was packing my things to leave Belgrade, I found five folded banknotes in the pocket of my pajamas. Five hundred dollars. From that time I never heard of Riva-Reviva again. [quoted with the gracious permission of Ladislav Porjes from the manuscript of the yet unpublished book CENZUROVANY ZIVOT: Z pameti cesko-slovensko-zidovskeho reportera (A CENSORED LIFE: From the memoirs of a Czech-Slovak-Jewish Reporter)]

I abandoned my Germanic studies after three semesters, because a lack of money and the war trauma had deprived me of the ability to concentrate. My wartime ordeals were constantly coming back to me. I suffered from post-traumatic stress. At night I had terrible dreams, and screamed horribly while sleeping. For several months I had the same dream over and over again: I was running, they caught me, stuck me into a pit and were shooting at me. It took several months before I got rid of this nightmare.

At the beginning of June 1947 I married a ‘goyte’ girl, Vlasta [Porjesova, nee Krestanova], whom I had met in Prague. She came with me to Michalovce, where my grandma, who survived the Holocaust in a ‘bunker,’ became very fond of her. We didn’t have our honeymoon until the end of September. We wanted to go somewhere to the ocean, but in Michalovce there was no travel agency. That’s why we ended up spending our honeymoon in the Lubochna spa below the Tatras. The weather was nice, the surrounding countryside beautiful. The only thing that spoiled the scenery was the view out of the window of our room. For in a field not quite a kilometer away reigned a rusty carcass of a shot-down German fighter plane. I never found out whether it was there due to the inertia of the local National Committee, or whether it was supposed to be a permanent monument to the Slovak National Uprising 35. But one way or the other, this small defect couldn’t spoil our permanent feelings of enchantment.

Moreover right during our first breakfast I discovered this pair of around sixty-year-old distinguished gentlemen in white t-shirts, long pants, and primarily with a tennis racket. One of them, tall and thin, was faintly familiar to me. I summoned the courage to walk over, introduce myself, and ask whether they wouldn’t have a game of American doubles with me. The fatter gent said: ‘In Turnov I knew one Moritz Porges, a gentleman of Moses’ faith, who owned a textiles racket. He and his family never returned from Auschwitz. I see that you too have a number on your forearm. Wasn’t he by any chance a relative of yours?’ The fatty’s remarks annoyed me, ‘Excuse me, but I’ve always been named Porjes, first name Ladislav, and I’m not a racketeer but a journalist.’ To which the fatty said, ‘My name is Josef B. and I’m a member of the Prague parliament. But despite you having a J instead of a G in your name, you are also an Israelite, right?’

That got my goat, and I said, ‘Well, well, could Mister MP perhaps in private also be an anti-Semite?’ The MP turned crimson, got up, but maintained his composure: ‘Allow me, young man, to answer this insult of yours with the words of T.G. Masaryk 36: ‘If I accept Jesus, I cannot be an anti-Semite!’ I therefore deduced that he’s apparently an MP for the People’s Party of Monsignor Sramek 37.

The second man was looking quite amused during the entire duration of our conversation. He then stood up, shook my hand and said, ‘And I, my dear colleague, am also a journalist, my name is Ferdinand Peroutka 38.’ That bowled me over, I cursed myself inwardly for not recognizing the legendary journalist, writer and political commentator Ferdinand Peroutka. He told me that my name was also somewhat familiar to him, that he had seen it in Rude Pravo. He praised one of my articles, a reportage from the national tennis championship. He said, word for word, ‘Never before nor since have I read anything better or wittier about tennis in the sports pages. If I remember well, you wrote that the tennis player Jarda had an advantage over Bernard not only in his service and volleys, but also in the length and size of his forearms and other appendages, ha ha.’ I replied, a bit craftily, ‘I occasionally had to resort to allegories, in order to tickle the reader’s fantasy. Otherwise, the writer Olga Scheinpflugova [Scheinpflugova, Olga (1902 – 1968): Czech actress and writer. Wife of Karel Capek] probably also used the method of transparent allegory when she wrote that you have beautifully long legs.’ I was afraid whether I hadn’t overdone it in my audacity towards this legend of journalism, but Ferdinand Peroutka seemed to be flattered. In the end I played tennis several times with both gentlemen and we said goodbye as friends. And the gentleman Ferdinand Peroutka praised my wife to such an extent that she turned red.

I began my career as a journalist while still a student, at Rude Pravo. I worked there starting in 1945 in the so-called Radioservice and occasionally helped out in the sports section. In the radio service we listened to foreign radio stations like France Press, Reuters and various others. We transcribed foreign news, which we translated from English, French, German or Russian to Czech. At that time I was also taking German Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy at Charles University. My boss at the paper was giving me shifts where I didn’t have time to go to my lectures. When I begged him to change my work schedule so that I could attend school, he said to me: ‘The Communist Party doesn’t need the intelligentsia!’

They fired me from the radio service in 1951 for alleged Zionism 39. So I then worked as a part-time night watchman and receptionist at the Hotel Alcron on Wenceslaus Square. Everyone except for me wore a uniform, but I refused to wear that monkey suit! I told them how many languages I knew, and for each one I got a premium – but it wasn’t that easy, they summoned some teacher who tested me whether I really knew the languages. Because they thought that I was making it up: I told them that I spoke English, German, French, Polish, Spanish, Hungarian, Yiddish and could understand Hebrew. When they found out that I did know them all, they had to pay me a premium of about 60 crowns a month for each language.

After that I worked in Kosice at the ‘Eastern Slovak Pravda,’ from where they again fired me for reasons of my ‘background’ – as my father had been a lawyer in Zilina, which seemed to the comrades to be too bourgeois of a profession. In 1953 the era of all-out struggle against Zionism in the CSSR hadn’t yet ended, but surprisingly I got an invitation to the secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. The secretary received me, who informed me that hey, when you’re making an omelet you have to break a few eggs, but that now nothing

more stood in the way of my again working as a journalist. He offered me a job in the radio. Comrade Stalin had just died, so I simultaneously translated the Russian commentary and commented the TV transmission. Then I was transferred to the job of commentator for the international life department.

I worked for the international life department of the radio, a year or so went by calmly, and then the ‘counter-revolution’ happened in Hungary [see 1956 in Hungary] 40. As I was the only one at the radio station in Prague that spoke Hungarian, and as the Budapest radio didn’t have any regular correspondent, I was chosen as the ‘war’ correspondent. It wasn’t a very lucrative job, plus I had to leave my terrified wife at home with our two little daughters, but my desire to prove myself was stronger. So in October of 1956 I boarded a special army plane in Prague. The Czechoslovak embassy sent a car for me, which took me to a hotel for foreigners. I had brought a practical leather coat with me for the foul fall weather. My clothing, seemingly so practical, was however soon to become my greatest handicap. For I didn’t suspect that leather coats were somewhat of a uniform of the otherwise plainclothes members of the Hungarian secret police. The rebels of course despised them, often they hunted them like wild game, caught and tied they poured diesel or gasoline over them, and like this hung them head down from the street lamps, so that they would slowly roast over fires that they built under the lamps.

And so it happened that I walked into a pub, hung my coat on a hook and in fluent Hungarian without the slightest trace of an accent I ordered some paprikash and a glass of wine. At that moment two men got up from the next table, bellowed: ‘Move your ass, you whore!’ and dragged me outside. I had no idea what was going on, I thought that it was some sort of asinine joke or unpleasant mistake. Luckily I managed to convince them to hold off, and pulled my international press ID from my pocket, where luckily my identity as a special ‘war’ correspondent was written in several languages. I have to admit that the two aggressors turned out to be two gentleman, they explained their blunder to me, that they had mistaken me for a secret policeman. They even didn’t let me pay for my food, with the words that I was their guest. I decided not to boast of my adventure to my wife. The poor thing would probably have gone mad with fear, if she would have found out that the Hungarians had wanted to roast me alive! All I did was ask her to send me a different coat. I lied to her, that the weather had suddenly improved and that I was hot in my leather coat.

I found Budapest considerably damaged by Soviet tanks. The events in Hungary were a manifold tragedy. A destroyed infrastructure, no small loss of life and also the remnants of any illusions about the socialist system. They induced the exodus of hundreds of thousands of citizens, who with their children and bit of luggage crossed over to neighboring Austria, which willingly opened its borders to them. In this way the entire population of the university in Gyor escaped, including the students, professors, rector and beadle. Fuel was added to the fire by the concurrent American-English-Israeli attack on Egypt, who besides the fact that they supported Arab terrorists, broke the agreement regarding free passage through the Suez Canal. This gave Moscow an excuse and propagandistic reason for armed intervention in Hungary’s internal affairs. The civilian and military leaders of the reform movement were executed – however, not publicly and outside Hungarian territory: the premier Imre Nagy 41 and the commander of the Budapest troops General Pal Maleter 42 were arrested and transported to Sion, Romania, where they were secretly executed. Hungarian society’s efforts at democratization were forced into reverse for a long time under the

new Party leadership of Janos Kadar 43.

After three months of my mission I returned to Prague. At the secretariat of the Communist Party Central Committee they judged my news of the Hungarian events to not be bolshevik enough, and 'excessively objectivistic.' Another reason for my persecution was the accusation that I was a 'capitalist': someone had made up a story that I and my brother had allegedly owned a shirt factory in Kosice. Already back then the regime was beginning to be truly absurd – as I had never had a brother, I was unfortunately an only child. And I had never owned any factory, I had always bought my shirts at the store.

In 1962 I published in Slovak my first book 'Josele a ti ostatni' [Josele And The Others]. I also published it in Czech, significantly enlarged, in 2001. At that time Arnost Lustig 44 wrote: 'Laco's stories are so chock full with drama, that each one of them would suffice for an entire novel.' Rudolf Iltis, editor-in-chief of the Jewish Vestnik, expressed himself thusly: 'Each story is a literal spectacle from the modern Greek tragedy of European Jewry.' [Iltis, Rudolf (1899 – 1977): general secretary of Jewish religious communities in the CSR. Editor-in-chief of the Vestnik (newsletter) of the Jewish Religious Communities] The president of the Bratislava Jewish community, the ethnologist Peter Salner wrote a review of it back then, whose last words were: 'Thank you, Mr. Porjes, for this bittersweet book.' I think that the book's message can be summed up with the Talmudic rule: 'Do not judge thy neighbor, if you have not been in his situation.' I remember that after the book's publication, Karel Hoffmann 45, the general director of Czechoslovak Radio, where I had worked as a commentator, invited me to meet with him. He berated me, how could I have dared publish a book with 'those contents' without his knowledge and agreement. He added crossly: 'After all, now all of our listeners will know that you're a Jew!'

In October of 1964 I accepted an offer from Czechoslovak Radio, and left for Berlin for four years as a permanent reporter and correspondent. I felt it as satisfaction that after years of persecution the comrades had finally deemed me worthy of representing our country abroad. I was a little afraid of how, after my stay in Auschwitz, I would adapt among the former 'supermen,' but everything turned out well. Each year in Rostock, at the so-called 'Ostseewoche' [Baltic Sea Week], foreign correspondents accredited in East Germany met, as well as business interests and journalists from both German states, from the countries of the RVHP [Council of Mutual Economic Assistance] and also the West. The entire affair was given a political gloss by highly placed political representatives of East Germany, who behind securely locked doors of the tightly guarded 'government' hotel talked with their capitalist partners, not in party jargon, but in completely normal business language. They, however, made up for it during public meetings with domestic and foreign journalists. There they tried hard to convince us about the advantages of East Germany, not only over Bonn, but also over their socialist allies.

In Leipzig I almost caused an international catastrophe! It happened in March of 1967 at the Leipzig Exhibition. Here there were relatively banal press conferences going on, where East Germany was boasting of its successes in all fields. Not exactly the most interesting visitors were walking around – however, only up until one of the members of the Czechoslovak exhibition told me in confidence that our pavilion will be visited by the prime minister Walter Ulbricht 46, the head of the East German state of 'workers and peasants.' This news caused commotion at the Czechoslovak pavilion. I went to see the head of the press department of the East German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Schwab, and asked him if I could do an interview with Walter Ulbricht. He resolutely

refused: ‘Comrade, that’s absolutely out of the question. It’s only a private visit.’ Then he became alarmed, as to how I had come by this information. I didn’t answer him, and only assured him that I didn’t have the information from any of his underlings.

After about a half hour, Ulbricht really did walk into the Czechoslovak pavilion accompanied by his bodyguards and minions from all possible ministries. Ulbricht had barely begun to have a look around, and I already pressed the button on my tape recorder thrown over my shoulder, and brandishing a microphone I started towards the distinguished guest. One of his armed bodyguards immediately shoved me aside, and I flew back against a wall. However my over six and a half foot co-worker threw me back with all his strength. I braked to a stop right before the prime minister, and sang out a banal introductory question: ‘How does the chairman of the State Assembly like the Czechoslovak exhibition?’ Though Ulbricht was surprised by the unexpected extempore, he signaled his bodyguards to step aside a bit. He began to formally, but willingly reply to my question. His monolog was full of monotonous hackneyed phrases, from which the chairman awoke only after my next question – what does he intend to do to improve the mutual relations of East Germany and the CSSR? ‘That’s a good question, and has come just in time. Tomorrow I’m flying to Prague, so that comrade Antonin Novotny 47 and I can together analyze the causes of the current stagnation, and find a road to the improvement of our relations.’ Then he uttered a few lyrical sentences about the importance and significance of cooperation between our two countries. I politely thanked for the interview, immediately got into my company car, and quickly sped to the local radio studio, so that I could send this sensational news to Prague. Because it was an unheard of and premature revelation of a state secret!

After being away for two hours I returned again to our pavilion. There my friends told me that after my departure a frantic search had broken out. Members of Ulbricht’s bodyguard, agents of the ‘Stasi’ secret state security, and officials from the East German foreign ministry were all furiously looking for me. Finally the Germans found me – they pleaded and then threateningly asked me to give them the tape in question. When they found out that I had already transmitted it from the Leipzig studio to Prague an hour ago, they started dragging me to a phone, for me to immediately call Prague Radio, that due to the highest interests of state the interview cannot be broadcast, for comrade Chairman had let out something he shouldn’t have, that premature disclosure of his flight to Prague could seriously endanger his security. I had to tell them that I was sorry, but that my interview with Ulbricht, as an exceptional breaking news item, had already been broadcast twice by Prague Radio.

I also became a member of the ‘Presseverein’ – the Foreign Press Club in West Berlin. For me, as a foreigner and journalist, the otherwise impermeable Berlin Wall was permeable day or night. It was enough to show the East German border guards at ‘Checkpoint Charlie’ a foreign press card, and the barriers lifted. On the other side, the West German border guards saluted, and that was it. For me the Foreign Press Club was not only a source of important information, but also a place of interesting encounters. I met, for example, with the later West German chancellors Willy Brandt 48 and Helmut Schmidt 49, who gave me an exclusive interview. Members of the Foreign Press Club were not only well-known Western journalists like Alexander Korab, reporter for several Bonn papers, Peter Johnson of the BBC, or Jean-Paul Picaper, correspondent for the Parisian paper Le Monde. But also correspondents from socialist countries, who like me were accredited in both parts of Berlin.

In the West Berlin ‘Verein der Auslandspresse’ [Foreign Press Club], it was an unwritten rule that each year its rotating chairman was elected from members of the Western media, while a correspondent from the socialist camp was elected as deputy chairman. In the spring of 1968, I was elected by a majority in a secret ballot. Among the first colleagues that came to congratulate me were, to my astonishment, representatives of the Soviet Union – the TASS [news agency] and Radio Izvestia correspondents. However one correspondent from the Soviet camp – a reporter from the central mouthpiece of the Communist Party Central Committee, ‘Pravda’ – pointedly ignored me. For he was my opponent, he didn’t succeed and couldn’t reconcile himself with his defeat. However, things were not to remain only at the level of ignoring me.

The next day after my election, my wife, two school-age daughters and I were woken early in the morning by the merciless ringing of the doorbell at our East German apartment. At the door stood representatives of our embassy, a member of the NKVD 50 and the last was the aforementioned reporter of the Soviet ‘Pravda’ whom I had defeated in the election. They claimed that my election to the function of deputy chairman of the West German ‘Presseverein’ had been manipulated. They insisted that I give up the position. I recommended to them that they should kindly verify how the correspondents from the RVHP countries voted. For my colleagues from the Soviet Union had boasted to me that they had as one voted for me. Further, I told them to kindly go see all of the about thirty members of the West German Foreign Press Club, and ask them if they agree with a review of yesterday’s elections. For a while our uninvited guests still tried to convince me to give up the position in favor of the ‘Pravda’ correspondent, that it’s after all my duty from a standpoint of international comradeship. But when they didn’t succeed, they left without any further threats. For in Czechoslovakia, the Prague Spring – both meteorological and political – was beginning.

They threw me out of journalism for the fourth time, and this time for good, after the occupation in 1968 – they recalled me from Germany from the position of foreign correspondent. Not long after, in the spring of 1969, they also fired me from the radio as a ‘counter-revolutionary’ – for I had returned from a trip through the Baltic countries with reportages in which local intellectuals denounced the entry of Warsaw pact troops into Czechoslovakia. This time the comrades’ patience was at an end. This time they no longer talked about preventive measures against Zionists and cosmopolitans. This time it was a final elimination of all ‘enemies of socialism,’ not only from public, but also from civilian life. My journalism career of eighteen years ended. It was only a temporary, perhaps a little longer pause between three phases of my racial or political discrimination, if there was really any difference between the two. That which now awaited me was the irrevocable end of any meaningful activity. During this time and in the following months I often heard slurs and allusions to my Jewish origin.

During the era of ‘normalization’ I changed jobs one after the other. First I worked as a guide for Cedok, but I didn’t last long there, and they fired me. [Cedok was the largest Czechoslovak travel agency, founded in 1920 and headquartered in Prague.] Then I worked for Prague Information Services, which was in its time a kind of sanctuary for people who had been fired from everywhere else – they hired us out to companies and concerns that needed capable translators. However, when the management changed, some Gottwald political cadre arrived, who fired everyone indiscriminately.

I also worked as a game machine coin collector for the Slavia soccer club. The machines, on which some sort of games were played, were in every other pub. I made the rounds of the pubs and

collected the five crown coins that people had stuffed them with. I drove around with heavy bags of five crown coins, and deposited the money at the bank into the account of the Slavia Prague club. Then I started a job as a warehouse laborer in the Office Machine Mechanics' Association, and I secretly made money on the side translating. In the Office Machine Mechanics' Association my boss in the warehouse was Tonda Petrina, also a persecuted journalist, with whom I had once upon a time worked in Rude Pravo. Working as a warehouseman I more or less peacefully, what with two small children and a wife also persecuted due to my political problems, made it to a very modest disability pension. I went on disability after being treated for over a year and a half for cancer of the lymph nodes, when I was quite badly off and I wanted to die. Miraculously, in the end I defeated the illness. I also struggled with heart problems and eye problems, glaucoma.

For more than forty five years, from the end of World War II up until the Velvet Revolution 51, dozens of articles had been published regarding the international solidarity of fighters against fascism, about the heroic participation of Russians, Ukrainians, Czechs, Poles, Serbs, Frenchmen, Romanians even Hungarians and progressive Germans side by side with the Slovaks in the National Uprising. Only of its Jewish participants was there nary a mention. While in fact 1566 Jews had participated in the Slovak National Uprising with arms in hand, as the historian Ladislav Lipscher recently found out. A fifth of them fell directly in battle, died of their wounds or were tortured by the Fascists. An historical milestone of the armed entrance of young Slovak Jews was the start of the National Uprising – 29th August 1944. Back then the Jewish prisoners of the Sered, Novaky and Vyhne camps, designated for transport to the camp of the 'final solution' were liberated.

There are three countries that I wouldn't be able to live in. One of them is Germany. I spent four years there as a correspondent, but I wouldn't be capable of living there permanently. After the war I was dogged by a question that I always asked myself when I met some German of my age. I could never keep from asking myself what that person had been doing during the war. Fifteen years after the war I even went to have a look at Auschwitz – Birkenau. An oppressive feeling fell upon me there, and memories surfaced. I'm not able to forget. You can't forget the Shoah – maybe it's possible to forgive, but you can't forget such horrors. I agree with Eli Wiesel 52, who claims that an incomparable, dense, unusual quiet rules in Birkenau. A second country where I wouldn't be capable of living are the United States. I've never developed a taste for the American way of life, food or culture. And the third country is Israel. It's probably going to sound cynical, but I think that I've got the right: I had my fill of Jews during the war. The worst experience was to see Orthodox Jews in the camp, who prayed, and then I saw them stealing from the others.

During this year's Chanukkah I received an honor – I was invited to light the Chanukkah candles, I was the seventh in line. It made me very happy, it was a real honor. At the gathering I also read a text, which I had written at home beforehand. I'm not a poet, I've always been a journalist and solely a writer of prose, but I found one quotation from the composer Ludwig van Beethoven [1770–1827], and I got an idea. So at the Chanukkah gathering I presented the following:

Within the scope of pre-holiday contemplation, I happened upon a noteworthy quote by the almighty Ludwig van Beethoven on the theme 'what is love.' Here is the genius's somewhat prosaic opinion. 'Love means to decide unconditionally for a certain type of imperfection.' Somewhat immodestly I've taken the liberty to confront this quote with my own experiences. In rhyme, even, here:
Often and long I've groped my way in life's history, from defeat to victory, and from victory to

defeat. Until I got married. After all it’s over a half century that I’m with the same girl. And we’ve got, if you please, two daughters and five grandchildren as well, I the eternal wanderer, am not certain, in which of both extremes, whether in victory or defeat, have I actually till life’s end moored.

Once upon a time I had tried to write poems for my wife, but back then she slandered me horribly, that she didn’t like them, that they were horrible. And so the whole sixty years that my wife and I have been together I’ve never written any poem for fear of her. This is actually the first after sixty years. But I’ve got to say, that everyone liked it very much. When I think about my life, full of dramatic reversals of fortune, full of escapes and tragedies, in the end I have to admit that I’ve managed a lot of good things after all. My wife and I have managed to raise two decent daughters. The older, Maja is a translator and the younger, Eva, is a chemical engineer, teacher of IT and Judaism lecturer. We have five grandchildren. I think that my sense of humor has been inherited by at least one granddaughter – a beautiful young blonde. She wears a t-shirt with a slogan written across her breasts: ‘I’m a natural blonde. Speak slowly, please.’ I think that she’s inherited my life’s philosophy from me – the most important thing is to not take life, nor oneself, too seriously!

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 Tiso, Jozef (1887-1947)

Roman Catholic priest, clerical fascist, anticommunist politician. He was an ideologist and a political

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

4 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.

5 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)

6 Prague Spring

A period of democratic reforms in Czechoslovakia, from January to August 1968. Reformatory politicians were secretly elected to leading functions of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC). Josef Smrkovsky became president of the National Assembly, and Oldrich Cernik became the Prime Minister. Connected with the reformist efforts was also an important figure on the Czechoslovak political scene, Alexander Dubcek, General Secretary of the KSC Central Committee (UV KSC). In April 1968 the UV KSC adopted the party's Action Program, which was meant to show the new path to socialism. It promised fundamental economic and political reforms. On 21st March 1968, at a meeting of representatives of the USSR, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, East Germany and Czechoslovakia in Dresden, Germany, the Czechoslovaks were notified that the course of events in their country was not to the liking of the remaining conference participants, and that they should

implement appropriate measures. In July 1968 a meeting in Warsaw took place, where the reformist efforts in Czechoslovakia were designated as “counter-revolutionary.” The invasion of the USSR and Warsaw Pact armed forces on the night of 20th August 1968, and the signing of the so-called Moscow Protocol ended the process of democratization, and the Normalization period began.

7 Italian front, 1915-1918

Also known as Isonzo front. Isonzo (Soca) is an alpine river today in Slovenia, which ran parallel with the pre-World War I Austro-Hungarian and Italian border. During World War I Italy was primarily interested in capturing the ethnic Italian parts of Austria-Hungary (Triest, Fiume, Istria and some of the islands) as well as the Adriatic litoral. The Italian army tried to enter Austria-Hungary via the Isonzo river, but the Austro-Hungarian army was dug in alongside the river. After 18 months of continous fighting without any territorial gain, the Austro-Hungarian army finally suceeded to enter Italian territory in October 1917.

8 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.

9 Arrow Cross Party

The most extreme of the Hungarian fascist movements in the mid-1930s. The party consisted of several groups, though the name is now commonly associated with the faction organized by Ferenc Szalasi and Kalman Hubay in 1938. Following the Nazi pattern, the party promised not only the establishment of a fascist-type system including social reforms, but also the ‘solution of the Jewish question’. The party’s uniform consisted of a green shirt and a badge with a set of crossed arrows, a Hungarian version of the swastika, on it. On 15th October 1944, when Governor Horthy announced Hungary’s withdrawal from the war, the Arrow Cross seized power with military help from the Germans. The Arrow Cross government ordered general mobilization and enforced a regime of terror which, though directed chiefly against the Jews, also inflicted heavy suffering on the Hungarians. It was responsible for the deportation and death of tens of thousands of Jews. After the Soviet army liberated the whole of Hungary by early April 1945, Szalasi and his Arrow Cross ministers were brought to trial and executed.

10 Yad Vashem

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

11 Kun, Bela (1886-1938)

(born Bela Kohn) Journalist, politician. He became a member of the Social Democratic Party in 1902 as a secondary school student, after which he worked as a journalist. He was drafted in 1914 and

two years later fell into Russian captivity. In 1917 he joined the Bolshevik Party in the prison camp of Tomsk and after his release he was acquainted with the communist leaders (Lenin, Buharin) of Russia. In November 1918 together with Ernoe Por, Tibor Szamuely and others, he formed the Hungarian branch of the Bolshevik Party. After returning to Hungary he organized the statutory meeting of the HCP. When Count Karolyi resigned in March 1919, he headed the new Hungarian Soviet Republic, the world's second communist government. After the regime collapsed he fled to Vienna and then Russia. From 1921 he became a leader of the Comintern. In 1936 he was removed from his post as a result of a show trial, then arrested and later probably executed, though the circumstances and the exact date of his death remain unclear.

12 KMP (Hungarian communist party - HCP)

A group of Hungarian prisoners of war (Bela Kun, Tibor Szamuely, Ernoe Por and others) formed the Hungarian branch of the Bolshevik Party in Moscow on 4th November 1918, dispatching members to Hungary to recruit new members, propagate the party's ideas and radicalize Karolyi's government. Upon their return to Hungary they soon organized the KMP (lit. Communists' Party of Hungary) which swiftly became the leading political power of the Hungarian Soviet Republic announced in March 1919 that lasted a mere 122 days. Afterwards, the party was reorganized with some of its leaders working in Hungary, and others abroad. The HCP operated underground in the interwar period, and established a socialist workers' party as a legal cover. Some operating in Hungary (Sandor Fuerst, Imre Sallai, Zoltan Schoenherz and Ferenc Rozsa) became victims of the terror practiced by the Hungarian authorities, while others (Bela Kun, Ernoe Por, Jenoe Hamburger and Jozsef Madzsar) were executed during Stalin's purges in the Soviet Union. From the end of 1944 it swiftly became the most influential political organization under various names in Hungary until the political changes in 1989.

13 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.

14 HSLS, The Hlinka Slovak People's Party

a political party, founded in 1918 as the Slovak People's Party, in 1925 the HSLS. Had an anti-communist, anti-socialist orientation, based itself on Catholic ideology, and demanded Slovakia's autonomy. From 1938 assumed a prominent position in Slovakia, in 1939 introduced an authoritarian one-party regime, its ideology was a mixture of clericalism, nationalism and fascism. Its leader until 1938 was Andrej Hlinka, after him Jozef Tiso. The HSLS founded two mass

organizations: the Hlinka Guards, a copy of the German Sturmabteilung, and the Hlinka Youth, a copy of the German Hitlerjugend. After the liberation of Czechoslovakia in 1945, it was banned and its highest officials put on trial.

15 Catlos, Ferdinand (1895–1972)

Czechoslovak officer, Slovak general and politician. During WWI he fought in the Austro-Hungarian Army at the Russian front. Graduated from Military College in France. In March 1938 (at that time he had the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel of the General Staff) he was named General I. Class of the Slovak State and simultaneously became the Minister of National Defense. He fully participated in activities of the Slovak Army during the German-Polish War and also had a hand in the sending of Slovak soldiers to the Eastern Front after 1941. In 1944 he attempted to contact the resistance. After the liberation, he was put on trial within the scope of the retribution decree, and was jailed during the years 1945-1948. He then worked as a civil servant in Martin, and died in obscurity.

16 KuK (Kaiserlich und Koeniglich) 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’.

17 Wiesenthal, Simon (1908–2005)

an architect in private life. Was persecuted by the Nazis for his Jewish origins. Survived being jailed in several concentration camps. After the war he devoted the rest of his life to the hunt for Nazi criminals and the perpetrators of the Holocaust. According to Wiesenthal’s own information, he himself helped catch 1,100 war criminals, including Adolf Eichmann, the head of the Gestapo, whose goal was the so-called Final Solution – Extermination of the Jews. Thanks to Wiesenthal, such individuals as Franz Murer, executioner of Jews, Hermine Braunstein, sadistic guard from the Majdanek camp, and Franz Stangl, the commander of Treblinka and Sobibor were brought in front of a judicial tribunal.

18 Buna

The largest Auschwitz sub-camp, called Buna, was located here from 1942 to 1945. The Nazis sent thousands of prisoners from various countries, the majority of them Jewish, to Buna (there were approximately 10,000 prisoners in this camp in 1944). A significant proportion of them died because of arduous slave labor, starvation, savage mistreatment, and executions. Those who were unable to go on working fell victim to selection and were taken to their deaths in the Birkenau concentration camp gas chambers. In November 1943, the Buna sub-camp was transformed into a separate administrative unit designated Auschwitz III. It included other Auschwitz concentration camp sub-camps at industrial plants. On 18th January 1945, the camp administration evacuated those prisoners who were able to march. They marched into the depths of Germany. The ill and weaker prisoners were left in the camp. Red Army soldiers liberated them on 27th January 1945.

19 Sered labor camp

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

20 Escape from Auschwitz (Vrba/Wetzler)

Rudolf Vrba (former name Walter Rosenberg) escaped from Auschwitz along with his friend, fellow prisoner Alfred Wetzler, and on 25th April 1944 gave a report in Zilina, the so-called Report of Vrba and Wetzler about the German extermination camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau, in which they described in detail the camp system and gave witness about the mass murder behind the camp walls, even furnished a plan with important buildings, facilities and gas chambers. Rudolf Vrba also published a book of memoirs, Utekl jsem z Osvetimi [I Escaped From Auschwitz].

21 Gleiwitz III

A satellite labor camp in Auschwitz, set up alongside an industrial factory, Gleiwitzer Hutte, manufacturing weapons, munitions and railway wheels. The camp operated from July 1944 until January 1945; around 600 prisoners worked there.

22 Army of General Svoboda

During World War II General Ludvik Svoboda (1895-1979) commanded Czechoslovak troops under Soviet military leadership, which took part in liberating Eastern Slovakia. After the war Svoboda became minister of defence (1945-1950) and then President of Czechoslovakia (1968-1975).

23 Gulag

The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919. However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the

population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.

24 Dukla

The name ‘Dukla’ comes from the name of the Polish town of Dukla, located 16km from the Slovak state border. The Dukla pass was in the past the most important way through the Carpathian Mountains. From 8th September to 27th November 1944, 85,000 Soviet and 6,500 Czechoslovak soldiers were killed or wounded here. Dukla was the main offensive on German defenses on Polish/Czechoslovak territory and simultaneously the gates to Czechoslovak liberation. The final breakthrough of the German defenses succeeded on 6th October 1944. During socialist times Czechoslovak Army Day was celebrated on the day of the breakthrough – 6th October. Today this memorial day is dedicated to the heroes of Dukla.

25 Gottwald, Klement (1896–1953)

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

26 Prochazka, Adolf (1900–1970)

Czech lawyer and politician. During 1945–48 one of the leaders of the Czech People’s Party, a member of the National Assembly and Minister of Health. In 1948 he resigned and emigrated to the USA. From 1950 he represented the exiled Czech People’s Party in the Christian Democratic Union of Central Europe and from 1953 until his death was the chairman of the Union Committee.

27 Kopecky, Vaclav (1897–1961)

Czech Communist politician and journalist. From 1938–45 was in Moscow as a member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSC) leadership abroad. From 1945–53 Minister of Information, 1953–54 Minister of Culture, from 1954 deputy premier of the government. He was a leading ideologue and propagandist of the KSC; main creator and propagator of Communist cultural politics of the 1940s and 50s. As a member of the inner circle of party leadership, he took active part in the illegalities of the 1950s, among others also in the preparation of show trials.

28 Nosek, Vaclav (1892–1955)

from 1939 one of the leading members of the Communist emigration; from 1945–53 Minister of the Interior, from 1953 Minister of Labor.

29 Rude Pravo

daily paper published by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia; founded in 1920, after the schism between Czech social democrats and communists. After the Velvet Revolution in the fall of 1989 the staff disassociated itself from the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC) and began publishing the daily paper Pravo.

30 Pravda

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

31 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.

32 Dubcek, Alexander (1921-1992)

Slovak and Czechoslovak politician and statesman, protagonist of the reform movement in the CSSR. In 1963 he became the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia. With his succession to this function began the period of the relaxation of the Communist regime. In 1968 he assumed the function of General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and opened the way for the influence of reformist elements in the Communist party and in society, which had struggled for the implementation of a democratically pluralist system, for the resolution of economic, social and societal problems by methods suitable for the times and the needs of society. Intimately connected with his name are the events that in the world received the name Prague Spring. After the occupation of the republic by the armies of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact on 21st August 1968, he was arrested and dragged to the USSR. On the request of Czechoslovak representatives and under pressure from Czechoslovak and world public opinion, they invited him to the negotiations between

Soviet and Czechoslovak representatives in Moscow. After long hesitation he also signed the so-called Moscow Protocol, which set the conditions and methods of the resolution of the situation, which basically however meant the beginning of the end of the Prague Spring.

33 Sik, Ota (b
1919): in 1940 he entered the illegal Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC), from 1941–45 jailed in the Mauthausen concentration camp. From 1961–69 he was director of the CSAV (Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences) Economic Institute, 1966–68 chairman of the Czechoslovak Economic Association, 1962–69 member of the KSC Central Committee. Sik was forced to leave the government after the invasion in August 1968, and remained abroad. In May of 1969 he was expelled from the KSC Central Committee, gradually stripped of all functions and in 1970 also of Czechoslovak citizenship. Since 1970 he has lived in Switzerland, where he worked as a professor at the University of Basel.

34 Hajek, Jiri (1913–1993)
Czech lawyer, historian, diplomat and politician. 1948–69 member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC); 1955–58 the Czechoslovak ambassador in Great Britain. 1962–65 permanent representative of the CSSR at the UN. 1965–67 Minister of Education and Culture. 1968 Minister of Foreign Affairs. In August of 1968 he protested at the UN against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Soon afterwards removed from his position and expelled from the KSC. During the 1970s and 1980s he belonged to the leading members of the opposition to the totalitarian regime. In 1978 a spokesman of Charta 77, from 1988 the chairman of the Czechoslovak Helsinki Conference. 1990 – 92 adviser to the chairman of the Federal Assembly, Alexander Dubcek.

35 Slovak National 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.

36 Masaryk, Tomas Garrigue (1850-1937)
Czechoslovak political leader and philosopher and chief founder of the First Czechoslovak Republic. He founded the Czech People’s Party in 1900, which strove for Czech independence within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, for the protection of minorities and the unity of Czechs and Slovaks. After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1918, Masaryk became the first president of Czechoslovakia. He was reelected in 1920, 1927, and 1934. Among the first acts of his government was an extensive land reform. He steered a moderate course on such sensitive issues as the status of minorities, especially the Slovaks and Germans, and the relations between the

church and the state. Masaryk resigned in 1935 and Edvard Benes, his former foreign minister, succeeded him.

37 Sramek, Jan (1870–1956)
Czech politician and statesman, Catholic priest. In 1912 named papal monsignore. 1918–39 member of the National Assembly. 1919–38 leader of the Czechoslovak People's Party. 1921–22 Railways Minister, 1922–25 Minister of Health, 1925–26 Minister of Posts, 1926–1929 Minister of Social Care, 1929–38 Minister for Unification of Laws and Administrative Organization. Belonged to the most agile of coalition politicians (called the "minister of compromises"). 1940–45 chairman of the Czechoslovak government in exile in London. 1945–48 again the leader of the Czechoslovak People's Party. In 1948 he resigned and was arrested during an unsuccessful attempt to escape abroad, and jailed until his death.

38 Peroutka, Ferdinand (1895–1978)
Czech journalist and political publicist of liberal orientation. In 1948 went into exile, 1951–61 was in charge of the Czechoslovak broadcasts of Radio Free Europe.

39 Zionism
a movement defending and supporting the idea of a sovereign and independent Jewish state, and the return of the Jewish nation to the home of their ancestors, Eretz Israel – the Israeli homeland. The final impetus towards a modern return to Zion was given by the show trial of Alfred Dreyfus, who in 1894 was unjustly sentenced for espionage during a wave of anti-Jewish feeling that had gripped France. The events prompted Dr. Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) to draft a plan of political Zionism in the tract 'Der Judenstaat' ('The Jewish State', 1896), which led to the holding of the first Zionist congress in Basel (1897) and the founding of the World Zionist Organization (WZO). The WZO accepted the Zionist emblem and flag (Magen David), hymn (Hatikvah) and an action program.

40 1956 in Hungary
It designates the Revolution, which started on 23rd October 1956 against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest and began with the destruction of Stalin's gigantic statue. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops which had been stationed in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's declaration that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the uprising on 4th November and mass repression and arrests began. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy and a number of his supporters were executed. Until 1989 and the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.

41 Nagy, Imre (1896 – 1958)
As member of the communist party from 1920, he lived in exile in Vienna between 1928 and 1930,

then in Moscow until 1944. He was a Member of Parliament from 1944 to 1955, and Minister of Agriculture in 1944-1945, at which time he carried out land reforms. He became Minister of the Interior in 1945-1946. He filled several high positions in the Party between 1944 and 1953. After Stalin's death, during the period of thaw, he was elected PM (1953-1955). He promoted his 'New Course' which terminated internment, police courts and the relocation of the population, and began a review of the show trials while slowing down the forced industrialization and at the same time bringing up the standard of living. By developing light industry and food production, he strove to ease the burden of the peasantry and abolished kulak listings. He was forced to resign, and later expelled from the HCP by party hardliners, in 1955. He became PM again on 24th October 1956 after the outburst of the Revolution and maintained this post until his arrest by the Russians on 22nd November 1956, after which he was kept in custody in Romania. He was then returned to Budapest and executed on 16th June 1958, with other prominent participants of the Revolution, after a secret trial.

42 Maleter, Pal (1917–1958)

Hungarian army officer, Minister of Defense. As a lieutenant he was captured in 1944 by the Red Army. After 1945 he stayed on in the services of the army. In 1956 he joined the side of the rebels. From October 1956 was a member of the Rebel Committee of National Defense. In 1956 was named Minister of Defense. Maleter was the only non-party government minister. On 3rd November, in Tokoli, where the main Soviet army base was located, he and Istvan Kovacs, the head commander of the General Staff and Ferenc Erdeim, minister, negotiated regarding the withdrawal of Soviet armed forces. He was sentenced to death during the same trial as with Imre Nagy.

43 Kadar, Janos (1912 - 1989)

Communist politician, who supported the intervention of the Soviet troops in Hungary to crush the Revolution of 1956, and was installed as party leader (First Secretary, 1956-1988) and Prime Minister (1956-58) after that. Greater freedom of expression was allowed from 1959 onwards, and when Kadar held the premiership for the second term (1961-65), he took positive measures of reconciliation and cautious liberalization. Thanks to his efforts the Hungarian People's Republic became the most liberal regime in the Soviet block in the 1960s and 70s. In 1988 he was edged out and had the purely titular post of President of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP). Kadar remains one of the most controversial political figures in 20th century Hungarian history.

44 Lustig, Arnost (b

1926): Czech-Jewish writer. 1950–58 a reporter of Czechoslovak Radio; 1961–68 scriptwriter for Barrandov Film Studios (Prague). Emigrated in 1968, from 1972 he lectured on film and literature at the American University in Washington.

45 Hoffman, Karel (b

1924): 1959–67 central chairman of Czechoslovak Radio, 1967–68 Minister of Culture and Information, 1969–71 Minister–Chairman of the Federal Committee for Post and Telecommunications, 1971 Minister of Transport, 1971–89 member of the presidium of the Central

Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC). Participated in the preparations of the Soviet intervention in August 1968 and subsequently in the process of normalization. Leading representative of Husak's leadership in the 1970s and 1980s. In November 1989 he left political life. In February 1990 he was expelled from the KSC.

46 Ulbricht, Walter (1893–1973)
A leader of the East German communist Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) from 1949 to 1971, he also served as Staatsratsvorsitzender (Chairman of the Council of State: head of state) of East Germany from 1960, when President Wilhelm Pieck died, until his own death in 1973.

47 Novotny, Antonin (1904–1975)
in 1921 he joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC). During WWII Novotny participated in the illegal activities of the KSC – he was soon arrested and during 1941-1945 imprisoned in the Mauthausen concentration camp. In the year 1953 he became the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the KSC. Novotny reached the apex of his political career in the year 1957, when he was elected to the post of President of Czechoslovakia. In 1960 Novotny courageously proclaimed that socialism was being built in Czechoslovakia – subsequently the word Socialist became part of the name of the republic (Czechoslovak Socialist Republic – CSSR). Novotny's withdrawal from the political scene began in the second half of the 1960s, when reformist tendencies began to appear in the Communist Party. During the time of the so-called Prague Spring, in 1968, Antonin Novotny was forced to abdicate from the function of President of the Republic.

48 Brandt, Willy (1913–1992)
German politician and Chancellor of Germany from 1969 to 1974. The social democrat received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1971 for his work in improving relations with the German Democratic Republic, Poland and the Soviet Union, known at home and abroad as Ostpolitik (relations with Eastern Europe and Russia). He resigned in 1974 after an espionage scandal.

49 Schmidt, Helmut Heinrich Waldemar (b
1918): German SPD politician. He was Chancellor of Germany from 1974 to 1982, as well as Minister of Defense and Minister of Finance and briefly served as Minister of Economics and as Foreign Minister.

50 NKVD
People's Committee of Internal Affairs; it took over from the GPU, the state security agency, in 1934.

51 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.

52 Wiesel, Eliezer (commonly known as Elie) (b

1928): world-renowned novelist, philosopher, humanitarian and political activist. He is the author of over forty books. In 1986, Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Wiesel teaches at Boston University and serves as the Chairman of The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity.