

# Otto Simko

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Bratislava

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Otto Simko is a man in the best years of his life, and is fully enjoying his "golden age". He actively engages in sports activities, devotes time to his hobbies and lives a rich cultural life. Within his family circle and the company of his grandchildren, he now with just a smile on his face reminisces about the many hard times in his life. He recalls what was beautiful and good. His family, friends and those close to him. Even though he's already lost many of them, they still hold a place in his heart. Many of the events in his life are moving and sad, but time has already healed these wounds. Even though they can never be completely forgotten.

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## Family background

My name is Otto Simko. I'm the son of Artur and Irena Simko. My name is unusual for a Jewish family [Jews living on Slovak territory before World War II had mostly German surnames, which is closely tied to the reforms of Jozef II [1](#) - Editor's note], which is why I decided to investigate its origins. I pondered where it could possibly originate, and came upon one thing. During the time of Austro-Hungary, my great-grandfather lived in Halic [Halic: later Galicia, is a historical territory in today's southeastern Poland and northwest Ukraine. During the years 1772 - 1918 it belonged to Austro-Hungary - Editor's note]. This means that the name Simko is probably of Polish origin. But it's quite possible that my great- grandfather changed his original Jewish name in Halic, because the name Simko isn't Jewish. According to documents that I have, my great- grandfather must have spoken German, as back then our name, Simko, was written Schimko and was written in German Schwabacher [also called Gothic, or black-letter script].

My grandfather, Albert Simko, was born in 1866 in the town of Rajcany. He had a pub in a small village named Dolne Chlebany, today it's in the Topolcany district. It was a typically Jewish pub, together with a small store. My grandparents were married on 25th August 1891. I don't know much about Grandpa Simko. I remember that he used to give me candies, just little details like that. I know that he spoke German, Hungarian and of course Slovak. My grandfather was a kulak [2](#). He had 40 hectares of land in Dolne Chlebany, in Rajcany and I don't know where else. I also know that my grandfather annually sent two wagons of hops to Munich.

My grandma, Malvina Simkova, nee Löwyova, was born on 11th June 1871 in Trencin. Someone remembered that her grandfather, or great-grandfather was a famous rabbi. But who it was, I have no idea. From this one can deduce that in those days these members of my family were Orthodox Jews <sup>3</sup> [Neolog communities <sup>4</sup> in Slovakia began appearing only after the Budapest Congress in the years 1868/69 - Editor's note]. I had very good experiences with my grandma. After my grandfather died she lived with us. Grandma even also brought up my daughter, Dasa. She was a very wise woman. People from all around used to always come to her for advice. Malvinéni [Hungarian: Aunt Malvina - Editor's note] was a concept. When she was 95, she was drinking beer in Zelezná Studnicka [Zelezna Studnicka: a recreational region near Bratislava - Editor's note] and someone said "Grandma, that's a beautiful age to be." She said: "What? That's a beautiful age?! Eighty, that was beautiful!". So I'm sticking to that, and when I was 80, I said to myself that this is that beautiful age that my grandma mentioned. She was of small stature, poor and those kind of people live a long time. She had gray hair. Beautiful smiling eyes. Her eyes, shone, laughed. She radiated well-being and wisdom. She had no schooling. She was a housewife from the farm. She had natural intelligence and that's what gave her personality character. Grandma Malvina died at the age of 100, on 19th May 1971, and is buried in Slavicie Udolie in Bratislava. Up to the war, Grandma was an Orthodox Jewess. After the war, no longer.

The Braun family is from my mother's branch of the family. My grandparents were named Vilmos [in Slovak Viliam] Braun and Cecilia Braunova. My grandfather on my mother's side was born in the town of Dolná Lehota, in 1850. He owned a café in Nitra. The popular Braun Café was very well known in this city. The café was located in the center of Nitra, beside the then Theater of Andrej Bagar. Unfortunately it's been since town down. They were enlarging the town square, so they leveled it. I don't remember my grandfather, he died in Nitra in 1920. That one I never knew. My grandma, Cili [Cecilia], her I remember well. She and her husband had eleven children. I think that two of them died right after birth. What my grandmother's maiden name was, that I don't know. I only know that she was originally from Nitra. She was born in 1856 and died, in 1936, in her hometown of Nitra.

The most characteristic for the whole family was Vilmos Braun. I've even got a book, named Nevet a Nyitra - Usmievava Nitra [in Hungarian and Slovak: Smiling Nitra], that contains all the anecdotes about Vilmos Braun. There are a lot of them. They're anecdotes typical of small-town café life during peacetime [during the time of the First Czechoslovak Republic <sup>5</sup> - Editor's note], when people had no worries. They amused themselves by playing tricks on each other and were happy when they successfully pulled off some mischievous prank.

One of the anecdotes about the Brauns says that Grandma Cili always asked: "Mikor jöttel haza? When did you come home? "I was already home at one." She didn't believe him and said to herself: "I'll get the better of you." She lay down in bed crosswise. He'll have to wake her up when he comes home at night...! In the morning Grandma wakes up, and Vilmos is fast asleep beside her. Or there was this ad in Hungarian. At night a bed during the day a 'fotel'. That's this type of folding bed. And he wrote a letter to the factory. Please sirs, I'm a café owner, I work at night and sleep during the day. Do you also have something that's a 'fotel' at night, and a bed during the day? It's full of these stories. Vilmos had a beautiful watch. "Mr. Schlessinger, I'll give this watch to you." "But why?" "My only condition is that you've always got to tell me the time. When I ask you, when I won't have a watch. You'll tell me." Schlessinger knew that something was up. But he took the

watch. Vilmos let him wait for two days, after all, he had a spare watch. The third day, at 1:00 a.m., his servant is banging on Schlessinger's window: "Mr. Braun wants to know what time it is." So by then Schlessinger knew what the deal was. That's the Braun family.

Of Cecilia and Vilmos's children, Aladar now occurs to me. He died along with this whole family in Sobibor [6](#). His wife Sarika as well as the children, basically the whole family died. Aladar was an extremely interesting person. At home he at first began to raise rabbits. Then he rented out a spa - Ganovce, near Poprad, and recruited children from Budapest, and also from all of Slovakia, advertising it as being in the Tatras [High Tatras: mountain range in northern Slovakia. The highest peak is Gerlachovsky Peak (2,644 m) - Editor's note]. Children from Budapest arrived there, having been sent to the Tatras by their parents. But they never saw the Tatras. Ganovce was three kilometers from Poprad [Poprad: the biggest town in the foothills of the High Tatras, with a population of 54,098 - Editor's note]. But Aladar was so clever, that he knew how to deal with them and keep them there. In the end everyone was satisfied. I also used to go there together with my brother every summer.

Here's one interesting incident with Aladar, so you can get to know the Braun nature. There was a Mr. Pazmandy in Nitra, a well-known man. He was this "degenerate" member of the upper class, simply put, a little loopy. Once Pazmandy arrived in Ganovce with his coach, or car, I don't exactly know any more. He arrived with a fishing rod. When Aladar saw him, he said to himself: "Holy moly, how in the world will I get rid of him?!" and asked him: "Pazmandy, why are you here?" "Well, I've come to catch some fish." "And what's the fishing rod for?" "I've come to fish, haven't I?" "Mr. Pazmandy, here in Ganovce we catch fish in a completely different way." "And how, Mr. Braun?" "Well, you need an alarm clock and an axe." "And how's that?" "You put the alarm clock on the shore, and when a fish comes to have a look what time it is, you hit it on the head." To this he replied: "Sir, you have insulted me!" He turned around and offended went home. That's the Braun nature.

I'd also mention the black sheep of the family. This was Eugen Braun, a musical clown. The way it sounds. A typical musical clown, with a little violin and lots of instruments. He used to perform in circuses in Belgrade, Budapest, Sofia - all over the Balkans. A big black sheep of the family. A clown. But he was hugely successful. The king of the southern Slavs, Petar II [7](#) even invited him to his court. What he did is that he arrived with a large violin, broke it, and took out of it a small violin. Otherwise he also had a cello. But he didn't want to carry it around any more, and so he gave it to me, and I then had to learn to play the cello, because of him. His clown nickname was Kvak [Quack]. Because he used to perform with a trained duck. The duck was trained so that he'd put it down beside him. He'd play and the duck would quack in time, when he wanted. How he did it, I have no idea, but he had huge success with that duck. Once a terrible thing happened. He sent the duck home, and Grandma Cili slaughtered it. That was a huge catastrophe. Now, I don't want to wrong her, whether she killed it on purpose or not. But a clown for a son didn't sit well with her.

I remember, this was already in the time of the Slovak State [8](#). At the time Eugen was living in Romania. He said that he'd like to come home, and Grandma wrote him don't come, as things are bad for Jews here. Despite that he came. He was home for three weeks and died. He died a natural death in the hospital. As if he'd felt that he'd die and needed to say goodbye to his family. That might have been in 1942, right when the transports were taking place. He might have been about 44 or 45 years old at the time.

Another of my mother's brothers was Artur. He lived in Bratislava, in the Manderlak [Manderlak or Manderla Tower: considered to be the first so-called skyscraper in Bratislava, and in Slovakia. It was built in 1935 according to the designs of Rudolf Manderla, after whom it is named. It has 11 floors and for a long time was the tallest residential building in Bratislava - Editor's note]. He worked as a clerk for some insurance company. Later, after the war, he lived in New Zealand. Before he died, he managed to return home. He died on the plane on the way back to New Zealand. It was as if both Artur and Eugen both felt their end drawing near, and came to say home to say goodbye. Artur's son was in the English army, and after the war [World War II] he moved to New Zealand.

My mother's oldest sister was Matilnéni, alias Matilda. Matilnéni had two husbands. Her first husband was Juraj Weiss. Her first son with this husband was Kliment. After the war he was hounded by the StB [9](#). He died tragically, as the StB came to his apartment in Cukrova Street in Bratislava. He didn't want them to arrest him, and so he jumped out of the fourth floor. He committed suicide. Matilda's second son, Ondrej, who we called Bandi, Weiss was a musician. He used to play in cafés. He died during the Holocaust, in the gas. He was one very merry boy. See, a typical Braun. He didn't have any children. The third son, Ludovit Klein, was already from my Aunt Matilda's second marriage. He lived in Munich. He died a natural death. He survived the war in Hungary. Later he emigrated in Lima, and then to Munich. Matilnéni died of cancer, already before the Holocaust, in Nitra.

The most tragic fate was that of Serena Braunova. Sczemcinéni [Hungarian: Aunt Sczemci]. She married a man by the name of Bela Szilagyi. Bela Szilagyi was a very respected Nitra lawyer during the times of a mayor named Mojto [Frantisek Mojto]. He died already before the war, in 1937. Serena was the richest of my mother's siblings. After her husband's death she owned fields and properties in the city and its surroundings. But later, riches cost her her life. Someone told her to sell her properties, that it would save her from deportation. But as soon as she sold them - for a symbolic price, of course, they immediately put her on a transport, with the comment 'return undesirable'. Serena and Bela had no children.

Lajos [Ludovit Braun] survived the Holocaust using Aryan papers in Liptovsky Hradok, as a journalist, under the name Ludovit Bran. He kept on writing, he even published some articles, mainly a Hungarian paper. I think the paper was named Reggel. In Nitra he had a stationery store by the name of Palas. He didn't start a family, he lived with his wife, Aranka. They didn't have any children. After the war he died of cancer. Aranka then lived in Nitra in a retirement home. She died of natural causes.

The next was Hugo. He later ran the Braun Café after his grandfather. He's also illustrated in that book, *Usmevava Nitra*. Of course there are also some anecdotes in about him. He was in hiding during the war, but I don't know where. He died after the Holocaust of natural causes. He married before the war, and had a son, Viliam. His nickname is Bubi. Bubi lives in Munich.

Rezso, Rudolf, they called Cigi, because he was like a gypsy, completely black [from Cigan, the Slovak word for Gypsy]. I've got this impression that Grandma Cili must have had him with some Gypsy [the interviewee said it as a joke - Editor's note]. He was an amazing guy! He was very intelligent. In fact, during the war he saved me. My family, the Simkos - that is, my grandma, brother, father, mother and I, were in a camp in Vyhne. Before Vyhne we were in the Zilina

collection camp. Rezso was still free. He made us a fake baptism certificate. So that we'd been converted [to Christianity] before 1938. I'd never in my life seen a priest, and neither had my family. Anyways, those who'd had themselves converted before 1938 were supposed to go to the Vyhne camp [10](#). It was for those in mixed marriages and Jews who'd converted before 1938. And Rezso brought a piece of paper to Zilina, that my father had been converted in 1938, so they didn't send us to the gas in the Auschwitz concentration camp, but to Vyhne. Basically, he saved us. He himself didn't manage to save himself. They then caught him in the second batch [11](#) and in 1944 he died.

All the Brauns had a high school education, with a natural intelligence and capable of surviving and knowing how to get ahead in life. In a word a typical vital family... Unfortunately not all of them managed to survive the horrors of the war.

My father, Artur Simko, was born in Dolne Chlebany on 31st August 1892. He's the son of Malvina and Albert Simko. He studied in Budapest. That's also this little curiosity. Jews were usually faithful to the regime that was in power at the time. Back then it was Austro-Hungary. My father was somewhat of an exception, he didn't fit into the usual Jewish stereotype. He got into Slovak society, and was a pan-Slavist [12](#). Sometimes he even had problems because of it, as my grandma, his mother told me that once some people came to see her and said to her: "If you don't do something about that Artur of yours, if you don't rein him in, we'll have to put him in jail." Actually, he was a dissident even back then. A Slovak against Hungarians. That's really quite atypical among Jews. In 1922 my father Artur married my mother Irena, nee Braunova. How they met and where the marriage took place, that I don't know anything about.

My mother, Irena, is of course one of the daughters of Viliam and Cecilia Braun. She was born in 1897 in Nitra. They called her Csibi. No one knew her by any other name than Csibinéni. Csibe, which means chick, that's from Hungarian. Because she was this typical little chick, merry and chipper. My mother was amazing. Unfortunately she got cancer. Just the year before she died, we'd still been skating and skiing together. In 1953 she died suddenly in Zilina of cancer.

After their marriage, my father and mother moved to Topolcany. After Grandpa died, Grandma moved in with us, and became a matter-of-fact part of our family. At first my father made a living as a lawyer, but this profession didn't make him very much, as a barrister he went bankrupt. And mainly because others were charging fifty crowns an hour, and he charged ten. He was also an extremely fair person. Not very suited for the world as it was back then. Well, because he didn't succeed as a lawyer, he became a judge. They then transferred him in this job from place to place. When I was 3 years old we had to move from Topolcany to Nove Zamky. So as a three-year-old I moved to Nove Zamky. But after three years we again moved. This time to Nitra. They'd transferred my father there, and our entire family, including Grandma, had to move again. In Nitra my father worked as a judicial advisor. I don't remember much from Topolcany or Nove Zamky any more. But Nitra was my entire childhood. My mother liked to dress nicely and fashionably, and I've even got photos. My father was a judge and also dressed well.

In Nitra we had a four-room apartment. My parents had the bedroom, my grandmother and I shared a room. Another room was this fancy one, and one was a normal one. We had it very nicely furnished. Wooden furniture from the beginning of the 20th Century, leather armchairs, a dining table with chairs, a piano. They were these elegant things. I've got them to this day. We had an

exceptionally large library. All this belonged to the standard our household was at. We also had a grand piano. My mother played the piano and, later so did I. I still play to this day. I can't read music, but I know how to play. Though I did take music lessons for about two years, I didn't learn much, because I hated the teacher. We had only a few things that were typically Jewish. A Chanukkah candelabra, that we definitely had. I don't know if there was a mezuzah [Mezuzah: a box for parchment that's fastened on the right side of gates and doors in Jewish households - Editor's note] on the door. We only used the candelabra during Chanukkah [Chanukkah - the Festival of Lights, also commemorates the rebellion of the Maccabees and the re-consecration of the Temple in Jerusalem - Editor's note]. Mother would play the piano and we'd sing. Though we weren't Orthodox, we cooked kosher <sup>3</sup>. At least Grandma tried to keep it up. There'd always be barches, shoulet and other Jewish foods. On Friday we roasted a goose. First would come liver with cracklings, then on Saturday the drumsticks and on Sunday we'd have the breasts. This is exactly the way it went every week. At home we observed virtually all the holidays. There was seder [Seder: a term expressing a home service and a requisite ritual on the first night of the Passover holiday - Editor's note], Pesach [Pesach or Passover: commemorates the Israelites leaving Egyptian captivity, and is characterized by many regulations and customs. The main is the prohibition on eating anything leavened - Editor's note]. For Sukkot [Sukkot: the Festival of Tents. A singularly festive atmosphere dominates during the entire week that this holiday takes place, where the most important things is being in a sukkah - Editor's note]. My favorite was Pesach, and I also remember seder. So, for example, my grandfather kept his café open both on Friday and Saturday [The Sabbath: during the Sabbath, 39 main work activities are forbidden, from which the prohibition if others stems. Among the forbidden activities is for example "the manipulation of money" - Editor's note]. I've got this impression that he was also Neolog. For sure they weren't Orthodox, when he had his café open on Saturday, and accepted money. Not only the Jewish population visited the café. The gentry also visited it, small-town bon vivants.

## Growing up

I spent practically my entire childhood in Nitra. Very often we'd go to Zobor [Zobor: a hill by the city of Nitra (height above sea level 588 m), in the Tribec mountain range - Editor's note], both with friends and with my family. I know every corner of it there. I spent all my free time there. In the summer we'd go biking there, in the winter skiing. I always liked sports. I spent a lot of my free time doing sporting activities. At home we had a ping-pong table in the courtyard. My brother and I would often play table tennis. In those days there were two places to swim in Nitra, so we used to go swimming.

When I was 13 I had a bar mitzvah [Bar mitzvah: "son of the commandments", a Jewish boy that has reached the age of 13. A ceremony in which a boy is proclaimed to be bar mitzvah; from this time onwards he must obey all commandments prescribed by the Torah - Editor's note]. I know that I had to study with a cantor. I wasn't very good at singing, that was very bad, but I suffered through it and then some children that my parents had invited to our place came for the party. I don't think that I got a gift as such. I had only the party. My brother also had a bar mitzvah. Both of us had it in the Neolog synagogue in Nitra with Rabbi Schweiger.

My father was a judge. We didn't go hungry, but neither were we rich. I know that my father's monthly salary was 1200 crowns [in 1929, it was decreed by law that one Czechoslovak crown (Kc)



was equal in value to 44.58 mg of gold - Editor's note]. That was a lot, but not again that huge an amount. The only one in the family back then to have a car was Serena Szilagyi. We also had one permanent household helper, besides the one that took care of us children. She took care of the household, cooked and did the shopping. She lived with us. I also know that she used to get 20 crowns a month.

Aunt Serena once paid for our vacation in Yugoslavia. That I remember, that she took my mother, brother plus one lady who took care of us children on vacation. We had this woman in our household that took care of us. We were in Crikvenica, by the sea. At that time I was about 7, my brother 3 years younger. I've got the feeling that Aunt Szilagyi also helped us financially. My mother was this entertaining type. I remember that when we were in Yugoslavia, below deck there was a piano, she was playing the piano and having fun, and I started crying. She was very disappointed that she couldn't play the piano. She felt good when she played. They were dancing there and I began crying and then she had to take me and leave. My mother was this entertaining type of person. She always liked to have fun, she and my father would also go to New Year's parties and I'd always wait to see what they'd bring me, what sort of balloons and confetti and things like that.

I've talked about my parents and grandparents, and we didn't get to my brother yet. Well, I wasn't a good student. My brother Ivan was always getting top marks. A much better student than I. He was very talented, and wanted to be a doctor, he was a great kid. He was born in 1927 and in 1944 he died. He was only 17 at the time. He was still this child that was growing up. This is what happened to him. You see, he was always very bold. We didn't look like Jews. He was hiding out in Nitra on Zobor and someone gave him away. Then he was in the Sered work camp [14](#) and before the deportations he hid in a pile of sawdust. But they found him, and then, when they were transporting them in a train to one of the concentration camps, he was apparently sawing his way out of one of the wagons. He wanted to jump out of the wagon while they were still transporting them. He tried to save his own life right up to the last moment. Unfortunately he didn't manage to. After that I didn't hear anything more about my brother.

As I've mentioned, my father was already a pan-Slavist during the time of Austro-Hungary. Then after the front, after World War I, also atypical for a Jew in Topolcany, in Koruna, he founded the Slovak National Council [Slovak National Council: the name of several high-level organs of various types during the history of Slovakia. See also [15](#) - Editor's note]. Koruna was the most elegant place there, a café. There were lots of Jews and Hungarians in high functions in Hungary, who were saying goodbye to Austro-Hungary and were still singing the Hungarian anthem. In the "next room over" my father was founding the Slovak National Council. My father's entire tendency was pro-Slovak, I'd say. For example, when during the war they wanted us to save ourselves from the Holocaust in Hungary, my father was against it. That was one line. The second line was social democracy [Czechoslovak Socially Democratic Labor Party - Editor's note]. He was on good terms with the minister of justice, Deder [16](#). My father was probably the only leftist judge in the region. It wasn't usual for judges. They were all national socialists, in short they were in the "butcher parties", they weren't in leftist parties. My father was this solo player, this black sheep. During the First Republic the Social Democrats were very active. I know that we used to go to the Social Democrats' Labor House. It was called the Labor Physical Education Union. The on the basis of this I became a shomer [a member of the Hashomer Hatzair movement. See also [17](#) - Editor's note]. A

shomer was the closest thing to those leftists.

**During the Slovak National Uprising [18](#) my father represented to city of Nitra at the unification congress of the Social Democrats and the Communists. That was the line, completely clear-cut, that my father took. My mother was apolitical. She couldn't care less one way or the other. She had completely different interests. And this Czechoslovak patriotism of our father's was also passed on to my brother and me. I remember composing poems about Stefanik [19](#). And even today, I can still recite that poem that I wrote as a schoolboy on October 28th [the anniversary of the creation of the First Czechoslovak Republic - Editor's note]. I pasted tricolors all over my chair, and recited on that chair. I still have that chair. That Czechoslovak patriotism was very strong in our family.**

My father was so respected that people tried not to express any anti-Jewish comments or indications in front of him. They had to try hard. My father was the first to begin with the People's Courts [20](#) after World War II. It was this satisfaction for him. Nitra was the first district in the republic and my father was the first judge who began trials with Fascists and Guardists [21](#). For example the Guardist Gombarcik, he convicted him and I even saw his execution. He was a person who had regular murders on his conscience. Then, when the National Court ended with big trials like Tiso [22](#) and Mach [23](#), my father became the chairman of the National Court in Bratislava. He judged people like Tido Jozef Gaspar [24](#) and Karmasin [25](#), the local German boss. He also judged Wisliceny [26](#) - Eichmann's advisor in Slovakia!

Despite the fact that we had never hidden our Jewish origins, by our name and the way we looked people mostly didn't recognize it. In Nitra our whole family also attended synagogue, yet we didn't belong to that part of the population against whom others would have some sort of objections to. Somehow they considered our family to be good Slovaks and one of them. So in the pre-war period we never felt any anti-Semitism. We also had friends and acquaintances from mixed society, both Jews and non-Jews. So it was actually this kind of assimilation, in the good sense of the word. Certain religious customs were preserved, the Jewish identity remained. But it never came across as repellent for the surrounding population. So they accepted our family without any problems. I can say that this time was without any expressions of anti-Semitism whatsoever. The breaking point didn't come until later, at school.

The principal of the people's school [27](#) was Feher. An exceptionally intelligent man, who kept the school at a very high standard. Unfortunately that school building is also a sad symbol for me, because Jews were concentrated in this school in Parovce before transports from in and around Nitra. From there and the through the train station began the road to the gas. So that school actually has two faces for me. One in the fact that I attended it and had very good adventures and experiences. A few years later it was a collection point for Jews.

The first time I traveled by train it was under these peculiar circumstances. It was in people's school. President Masaryk [28](#) was passing through Zbehy, probably to Topolcany [Kastiel in Topolcany was the summer home of president Tomas Garrigue Masaryk - Editor's note]. Principal Feher took our class to Zbehy by train. At the trains station in Zbehy we were waving to Masaryk, and at the time Bechyne [Bechyne, Rudolf (1881 - 1948): Czech journalist and publicist, Czechoslovak socially democratic politician - Editor's note] was the minister of transport, and we



were waving to him as well. It was this agitprop trip. Nitra wasn't on the main railway track. Zbehy were a railway nodal point and so we went to greet Masaryk from Nitra to Zbehy. That was my first train experience. amplified by Masaryk in the train that we were waving at. In my days people's school had five grades. I did four of them, and from fourth grade of people's school I went into high school. The building of the high school was multi- story with a large courtyard.

Before the war the Nitra Jewish community might have had several thousand people [official sources state that in the period before World War II, the Jewish community in Nitra was composed of 4,363 people. According to many contemporaries of the time, the number of Jewish inhabitants in the city was higher - Editor's note]. Nitra Jews were mostly concentrated in the city quarter of Parovce, which was the former ghetto. Here there was also the famous Nitra yeshiva [The Nitra yeshiva led by a rabbi named Michael Dov Weissmandl and students that had survived the Holocaust moved in 1946 to the USA, where it exists to this day under the name Yeshiva of Nitra Rabbinical College - Editor's note]. Basically it was poor people living in Parovce. The higher and middle class lived in the center of town. Parovce was mainly very neglected old buildings, the old ghetto. There was also a mikveh [ritual bath - Editor's note] in Nitra. But we didn't go there. I don't even know where exactly it was.

When I reminisce about school days, I can't say much about high school. It doesn't have so much to do with school subjects as that at that time the nationalists were beginning to show their teeth. Those were the main experiences from high school. There were about six Jews in our class, and already there you could feel this certain, you couldn't yet call it anti- Semitism, but this certain tension. Anti-Semitism didn't rear its head until one Sudeten German [29](#) began teaching us, in 'tercie' [third year], I think. He came to teach Slovak, but he was a German. He was explicitly against us. He asked me: "What do you speak at home?" I said: "Slovak". "You don't speak Slovak, you definitely speak Hungarian!" and he began whacking me over the head with a newspaper. It was already obvious.

But it was in 'kvinta' [fifth year] that the main turning point came. That was in 1939. When the Slovak State already existed. Back then the following happened. We were six Jews in the class, two girls and four boys. In the morning we came to class, and written on the blackboard was the title: Jews! Then followed a long litany of all that we'd caused the Slovak nation and the conclusion "and thus we've designated the following places for you." Originally we'd each been sitting somewhere else, and suddenly they designated that we all sit together. Mendlik, our homeroom teacher, arrived. He was a Czech, and when he saw what was on the blackboard, he became extremely upset. He went to see the principal. He told him that he'd no longer be the home room teacher for that class. He protested against it. Most of our high school professors were Czechs. This Mendlik taught us geography. So that's more or less how it started with that school in 1939.

## During the war

I ended school in 'kvinta', in 1939. I was still allowed to attend school for one more year. I could have done 'sexta' [sixth year] but I decided for hakhsharah [30](#). So I went to hakhsharah, intending to aliyah to the Palestine. The hakhsharah was in the town of Radvan near Banska Bystrica [the town of Radvan was annexed by the city of Banska Bystrica and became one of its city wards - Editor's note]. I was there for one year, and absolved many jobs there. Since then I'm very good at

making shoes. So I was a shoemaker. Before that I studied to be a bookbinder, so I also know how to bind books. By the way, later, in the Vyhne camp, I worked in a bagmaking workshop. There we sewed wallets and all sorts of things. I finally graduated from hakhsharah, but I didn't go to the Palestine. At the time it wasn't that organized yet and I myself decided not to go anywhere. Though I was prepared, I was supposed to first go to Denmark. I've got this large crate that was supposed to serve as a suitcase. I've still got it stored away in the cellar. In the end nothing came of it. So I stayed in Slovakia. The first guardian angel saved me when they came for me to our apartment in Nitra in 1942. Back then the non-family transports were going. It was the very first one. So they came to Seminarska Street, where we lived, for me as well. But luckily I was in Jur [Svaty Jur] at the time. We were digging a canal on the Sur River. So my father told the person that had come for me: "Otto Simko isn't here. He's working in Jur." And in this way I actually avoided deportation. That was the first guardian angel.

Once the Gestapo and the Guardists burst into Jur. It was nighttime and we were all sleeping in barracks. They came with the words: "Schweine! Hunde! Ausstehen!" [in German: Swine! Dogs! Get up!]. It was at night, and we got up. They had a list, and took boys away to the transport. At the time I wasn't on their list. But it was a sign for me that I couldn't stay in Jur any more. So I left there and returned back home, to Nitra. By then I wasn't on the list there anymore, so this is how I got through that first danger of the transports. But then, there was this thing, that they took my father to jail, to Ilava! Not as a Jew, but as a social democrat! As a political prisoner to Ilava. The transported my mother, brother and me to a collection camp in Zilina, intending to send us to Auschwitz or to one of the other German concentration camps. But they transferred my father from Ilava, to Zilina as well. That was a horrible meeting! He didn't know that we were there. And when he saw us there, that was very moving both for him and for us. For two months I was in Zilina with my entire family. Then my mother's brother, Rezso, brought a fake baptism certificate. In it, it stood that my father had been converted before 1938, and on the basis of that our entire family went to the Vyhne camp. We were actually the first transport that went through that gate not into cattle cars, but into passenger trains, which then took us to Bzenice, which is the station before Vyhne. Vyhne doesn't have its own station. From there they took us on buses to the Vyhne labor camp. In Vyhne I worked in a bagmaking workshop, where I learned to make wallets, briefcases and similar things.

An interesting thing was when we came from the collection camp, from Zilina, to the Vyhne labor camp. The head of the Jewish camp had us line up, and said in German: "You were all converted before 1938." To this one voice: "Not me, not me!" Everyone stood in shock, wondering who was shouting that. It was a proletarian from Bratislava, Willy Kohn. A notorious Bratislava character. He also got into the Vyhne camp, but not because he'd been converted, but because he had an Aryan wife. Because they were also sending people from mixed marriages there. "I got Aryan wife! I got Aryan wife!" You see, Willy didn't speak Slovak well. He was a Presporker [Prespork, or Pressburg - the German name for Bratislava - Editor's note] and didn't speak Slovak. To that was this first funny incident, gallows humor.

Vyhne was known for having a boss, Gindl, who had this specialty, when someone did something, he got 25 on the whipping horse. He had a whipping horse set up there. A certain Guardist named Ondra used to give out 25 blows. He had this little boat and we called him the little brigadier. But Gindl was then let go, and Leitner arrived. He was a soldier, and he was much more decent. After

his arrival the conditions in the camp got a bit better. We were in the Vyhne labor camp for ten months. Then my father got a departmental exception. Back then the minister of justice was a certain Fritz [Dr. Gejza Fritz]. He arranged for him to be employed in Trstena. He was responsible for the Grundbuch [in German: land register - Editor's note]. Polish towns that had fallen under the Slovak State needed to arrange some things in the land registry, and they put him there because of that. We were very glad to be able to leave.

But here's the way it was. Back then the transports weren't running anymore. It was this in-between time. When the transports had ended, and the next ones hadn't started yet. Those who were out, were afraid that they'd take them to Sered, Novaky or to Vyhne, but those who were already in a camp, they were content, because the transports were no longer running. But that Damocles' sword [metaphorically speaking, a symbol of ever-present danger - Editor's note] was still hanging over us. So in that sense it was good that we could leave that camp early. Otherwise, I've got this very interesting document from that camp. I think it's the only one, because labor camps didn't issue documents. The Jewish camp leadership, namely Mr. Wildmann, issued it to me. I had asked him for confirmation that I'd been in that camp. The confirmation sounds typically thought through in a Jewish fashion: "According to legal regulations. We cannot issue you a report regarding your employment in our Jewish labor camp, although during your stay from 18th October 1942 to 31st August 1943 you proved very satisfactory in our bagmaking workshop." They gave me a confirmation that says that they can't issue me a confirmation, although you from, to... in a word, I loved that idea. So I'm the only one to have a confirmation from that camp.

From Vyhne I went home, to Nitra. But the times were uncertain. I decided to get a job using so-called Aryan papers. I had a fake birth certificate, on which I didn't even have to change my name. With these papers I got a job as a bookbinder at the Hlavis Company in Liptovsky Mikulas. I went there alone, without my parents and that's where I was when the uprising [17](#) came along. So I immediately volunteered for the uprising and was a member of the 9th Liptov Partisan Division, in the Liptov Mountains. One thing has remained in my memory above all. There were five Jews in our division. We also slept in one tent, and everyone knew that we were Jews. We felt great during all the missions, as we felt this satisfaction, that now we had rifles in hand. We were no longer persecuted. Now we were equal. In short it was this feeling of amazing rebirth of your own person and also self-confidence.

The most powerful feeling was when one of my Jewish friends, Gabi Eichler, now he's in Israel and is named Gabi Oren, who was the boldest of us all. He was in the town of Vitalisovce at the time. The rest of us were in Zdiarska Dolina [the Zdiar Valley], in a cabin. In Vitalisovce he captured a German officer, and brought him to us in the cabin in Zdiarska Dolina. After a detailed interrogation it was ascertained that he was a guard from Dachau [31](#), a member of the SS. The result couldn't be anything other than execution. As partisans we couldn't take prisoners along with us. Execution as decided on, and the political commissar, Galica, picked two Jewish boys, me and another one, for the execution. Galica went with us as well. We went with that German up above the cabin, a little ways off, and there we told him to get undressed. We still needed his uniform. I even tried to explain to him in German why he had to die. He reacted: "I know what's going to happen to me. I'm still loyal to Hitler. I don't regret anything. Not even from the concentration camp, what I've done, with Jews. That was my belief, that it's right." In short, he felt to be a member of the SS up to the last moment. He didn't want to regret anything. Of course, for me it was then easier, and even that

shot came out easier. I'd never shot anyone from such a close distance before. I shot a person who really did deserve it, when you think about it. Well, and later I almost paid the price for that execution.

Later our partisan division, at the Zdiar cabin, was scattered by the Germans and we had to retreat across the hills to Rohac. One of the Jewish boys, Janko Pressburger, was wounded. Now he lives in the town of Ber Sheva, in Israel. Two of us carried him through the mountains. We lost our unit. We were then hiding out in Pribilina, and I went to Liptovsky Mikulas dressed as a civilian. I knew that the director of the hospital there, Droppa, hid partisans and Jews by pretending that they were patients. My task was to get our wounded friend into the hospital there. Well, in Liptovsky Mikulas I was caught by a Guardist by the name of Kruzliak. He checked my ID, but my papers weren't in order. He began asking questions, who I was, what I was. I had to pull down my pants in front of him. When he saw that I was circumcised, they threw me in jail right away. I was locked up in the local jail. When in the meantime the Germans arrived in Zdiarska Dolina, they exhumed that executed German. In the jail they were investigating what had actually happened, who had done it. Someone gave away the fact that I'd been in that partisan division that had executed him. So they investigated me in connection with the execution. I of course knew that if it came out, I'd be dead. I denied ever having been there. That I'd never even been a partisan and didn't know about it and so on. They beat me a lot, and wanted to get it out of me by force. But at this time my German helped me a lot. One SS soldier said to my interrogator, who was called Barnabas Magat: "I'm not sure about that little guy." By the little guy he of course meant me. They didn't know that I understood German. His doubts about my guilt buoyed me and despite a heavy beating I kept denying it.

In jail it was scabies that helped save me, when I think about it. Because I got scabies, and when the Red Cross arrived, they decided that I have to go to the hospital for treatment. Two militiamen led me at bayonet-point to the hospital for treatment. I told the nurse, when she wanted to take my clothes: "Leave my clothes here. I want to escape. And please, prolong the treatment for as long as possible." That was in December of 1944. So the militiamen waited for me in front of the washroom, and I opened the window and hightailed it away from the hospital. Then I got to Nitra and hid out there in the Mr. Truska's cellar. The way it was, was that I went to see one acquaintance that knew that my father had been a social democrat before. He sent me to another place, and from there they again sent me on. Until finally that Truska took me in. He had a bunker in the cellar, and there were about ten Jews there. All Orthodox Jews. I arrived there, everyone there had a beard, and the first thing they asked me was what was up with the rabbi. But I didn't know what was up with the rabbi.

My father was also in the mountains from the start of the uprising. My mother and grandma were in hiding in Nitra. My brother was also in Nitra in the beginning, but they then took him away. My mother and grandma were saved. They were hidden in the same place. I knew where they were hiding out. I knew that they were alive. We didn't know about my father, just like we didn't know about my brother's further fate. So liberation was actually this bittersweet affair. My father returned. But we were waiting for my brother. That was the worst disappointment.

## Post-war

Luckily we were able to return to our old apartment. We discovered that the Germans had had a casino in our apartment. The furniture was there, but the neighbors had looted everything else. But the apartment was there, and that was enough for us. We had someplace to come back to. Then also many of those that were returning lived with us, as we were the only ones who had at least some sort of haven. We had enough to be able to live. As soon as we returned to the apartment, I went down to look in the cellar. There were about fifteen people hiding there, because just then they were bombing the city. I was an excellent shelter from the bombing. Well, they were completely horrified when they saw me, because many of them had the things that had been taken from our place. But back then I didn't care about things. I know very well that they were very horrified that I'd returned.

But basically no one took an openly negative stance towards us. My father's position in Nitra was such that no one dared to in some way show some sort of hate, or something similar. Right away he was a people's judge in Nitra. When the people's court began to hold sessions, they didn't want to start anything with us. We also weren't out for revenge. What was important to us was for my brother to return. But that didn't happen. So that's how we survived the war. I had to graduate from high school by taking an accelerated program in Bratislava. After the front I moved to Bratislava. I didn't have anything in common with Nitra anymore. My father and mother stayed in Nitra along with Grandma. Only I was in Bratislava, studying. My father became the chairman of the Regional Court in Zilina. So my parents moved from Nitra to Zilina. In time my father became the chairman of the Regional Court in Bratislava. In 1953 my mother died of cancer, and is buried in Zilina at the Jewish cemetery. She had a proper Jewish funeral.

The Slansky trials [32](#) didn't affect my father in any special fashion. But something worse affected him. The justice minister was one very well known Jew, by the name of Reis. He was Gottwald's [33](#) good friend, a Communist. My father was the chairman of the Regional Court in Zilina, and this Reis stripped him of his position of chairman and designated a different person, a worker cadre, who started working there as the chairman of the Regional Court. Back then it wounded my father very much.

After arriving in Bratislava I finished high school by taking an accelerated program, and registered at Comenius University in Bratislava, at the Faculty of Law. So I was a law student. From 1945 to 1949. I got a break, because as a partisan I was credited with one year, or two semesters. So I studied law for only four years. Otherwise, studying law consisted of going to lectures. Some went, some didn't, you just had to pass the exams. I rented a place with two other classmates. Well, and then I finished my studies. Then I got a job at the Commission of Social Affairs. Later, already as a doctor of law, in the legal department. So I was there, but later I then led the education division at the Labor Commission. That lasted until the 'Slanskiade' [the Slansky affair].

Well, then there was that sort of intermezzo, that the Slanskiade had arrived. Suddenly I was working as a lathe operator in Martin. That was in the year 1951. Then I was a teacher in a home for apprentices, as they needed me there. Later I also worked as a 'labcor', or labor correspondent. As a worker I wrote various contributions for Prace [34](#). As a labcor they sent me for schooling, the fact that I was just by the way already a doctor of law didn't trouble them. But as a labcor, pretty please, I did well and they accepted me onto the staff of the daily paper Smena [35](#). In 1954 I started working in the offices of Smena in Bratislava. At first I worked in the labor department, then later mainly in the foreign department. I didn't have anything to do with law anymore. Law didn't



come in handy until they threw me off the staff of the paper, after Party screenings. In 1971, a couple of years after the arrival of the "brotherly armies" [36](#), I was thrown off the staff.

Finally I got a job as a company lawyer in one construction company in Bratislava. It was named Staving. Here it finally came in handy that I had studied law. I was a company lawyer, I used to go to meetings. I represented the company against employees. But it always ended well, because I always came to an agreement with the employee. He either withdrew his claim, or we came to some other agreement. I actually worked in Staving up until retirement. I was about 60 when I began working and retired. In retirement I again began writing for newspapers. After the war I never met up with anti-Semitism again. I think that in this respect I've got good experiences, I never had problems of this type.

Before the war I was a Neolog, a normal thing. After liberation, very many Jews, including me, saw a certain solution in leftism, Communism. So I don't have a relationship to Judaism through religion. Which is typical for people of my type, a common fate, past. All this brought me to Judaism, in that now I'm quite active in the B'nai Brith and Hidden Child organizations. So there I found myself. I entered the Jewish religious community in Bratislava about two years ago [i.e. in 2004 - Editor's note]. Even before that I participated in all events, but didn't formally join the community. But then I felt a summons, that I must fulfill this formality as well. Even though with me it has nothing to do with religion.

I'll mention my personal life after the Holocaust only very briefly. Back in those days there used to be company vacations to Bulgaria. From the Labor Commission I also went on vacation to Bulgaria. There I met my wife. She was a medical lab technician in the Tatras, in a sanatorium. For a long time nothing happened, but then it ended up with us getting married. She was named Matilda Podobnikova. She was from the Gemer [region], from a little village named Lubovnik. She was from a family with many children, there were six or seven of them. Her first name was officially Matilda, but everyone called her Mata. They then combined it with the famous Mata Hari [real name: Zelle, Margaretha Geertruida (1876 - 1917): a notorious dancer and courtesan. During World War I she was convicted of espionage and executed - Editor's note] and everyone called her Harina, Harnika or Hari. She wasn't Jewish. No one in her entire family was Jewish. Despite my origins, there wasn't even a pinch, not even a hint of some verbal slip, that they objected to my being a Jew! That was something amazing, as far as their relationship to Jews went. I really did find a family where it played absolutely no role.

Matilda and I were married in 1954 in Bratislava. Just at city hall. She worked in the Tatras, even when we were married. I worked for the paper in Bratislava. Then Matilda came to live in Bratislava. At first we lived in hotels, we didn't get an apartment until later. In the meantime my father and grandma moved here. They rented a place, finally they came to an agreement with the owner, and bought the apartment from him. My wife and I lived there with our little daughter who'd been born in the meantime, with my father and my grandmother. My wife died in 1996. She was five years older than me.

My wife and I had one daughter. She was born exactly two years after our wedding in 1956, and we named her Dasa. Dasa wasn't brought up in the spirit of Jewish traditions. She knows who her father is, and what fate befell his entire family. My wife and I didn't observe any Jewish customs. We had a normal household. I continued to be inclined towards Judaism, but only alone. I didn't



lead my daughter to it.

My grandma died at the age of 100. That was in 1971, and that was a period when she couldn't have a Jewish funeral, and is buried in Slavicie Udolie. My grandmother, who would have deserved it the most, didn't have a Jewish wedding. My father died in 1976, also here in Bratislava. He also had a civil funeral, and his ashes are scattered over the scattering meadow of the crematorium in Bratislava.

Because I'd been thrown off the staff of Smena, they didn't want to accept my daughter into university. She wanted to be a pharmacist. So at first she went to Prague, into a so-called zeroth year. Then they just barely accepted her into mechanical engineering, but she was there only a half semester. They then accepted her to the Faculty of Chemistry, where she was for about six semesters, but she said that she wouldn't work. so they finally gave her Russian and Bulgarian at university. There she even completed a doctorate and worked on Russian-Slovak and Bulgarian-Slovak dictionaries at the Language Sciences Institute. Currently she's working with schola ludus [schola ludus: a civic society whose main goal is the support and systematic development of lifelong, informal education, mainly in the sphere of natural sciences, the support of scholastic education in the sphere of general scientific and technical literacy - Editor's note], that's this one organization where they educate children in physics and chemistry.

Her husband is the actor Petr Simun from the Astorka Theater. Recently I attended one amazing performance, Eve of Retirement. It's a symphony of acting, playing in it were Kronerova, Simun and Furkova. Though there were only three actors on stage, but it was worth it! It's all on a Jewish theme. The play is very successful. My daughter has two children. My grandson is named Palko [Pavol] and my granddaughter Barborka [Barbora]. We see each other almost every day. They come here, then I go see them. In short, as if we lived together.

In retirement I make use of my free time and enjoy life. Four times a week I go swimming, which is a good thing. I inherited these sports activities of mine from my mother. She also had an all-around talent for sports. Until recently I also used to go skating. Of course, I also devote myself to cultural events. I have enough time, so I try to use it to the fullest. For suffering during the Holocaust, I get compensation monthly, and also something from the Claims Conference. But I've got to say, that given my modest lifestyle, I don't have these types of problems.

## Glossary

### **1 Joseph II (1741-1790)**

Holy Roman Emperor, king of Bohemia and Hungary (1780-1790), a representative figure of enlightened absolutism. He carried out a complex program of political, economic, social and cultural reforms. His main aims were religious toleration, unrestricted trade and education, and a reduction in the power of the Church. These views were reflected in his policy toward Jews. His ‚Judenreformen‘ (Jewish reforms) and the ‚Toleranzpatent‘ (Edict of Tolerance) granted Jews several important rights that they had been deprived of before: they were allowed to settle in royal free cities, rent land, engage in crafts and commerce, become members of guilds, etc. Joseph had several laws which didn't help Jewish interests: he prohibited the use of Hebrew and Yiddish in business and public records, he abolished rabbinical jurisdiction and introduced liability for military

service. A special decree ordered all the Jews to select a German family name for themselves. Joseph's reign introduced some civic improvement into the life of the Jews in the Empire, and also supported cultural and linguistic assimilation. As a result, controversy arose between liberal-minded and orthodox Jews, which is considered the root cause of the schism between the Orthodox and the Neolog Jewry.

## **2 Kulak**

Wealthy landowner, the major group of the agrarian bourgeoisie. The originally Russian term was adopted in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s. The 20-50-hectare kulak estates were based on the work of both, family members and external laborers, mainly the village poor. Often they maintained non-Agrarian activities too, i.e. milling, tavern keeping, transporting, etc. By absorbing smaller estates the kulaks grew stronger in interwar Czechoslovakia; also, the first Czechoslovak land reform (enacted gradually after 1919) was beneficial for them. During the First Czechoslovak Republic they took strategic positions in the countryside and gained important positions in the local governments; they were the main supporters of the Agrarian Party, the Hlinka Party (radical Slovak nationalists) and later the Democratic Party. After 1945 they were against the 'people's democracy,' they sabotaged the production and acquisition plans, therefore legal acts (even arrests) were applied against them. The collectivization of agriculture destroyed their economic positions.

## **3 Orthodox communities**

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

## **4 Neolog Jewry**

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

## **5 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.

## **6 Sobibor**

extermination camp located in the Lublin district of Poland, near the village of Sobibor. The camp was established in March 1942 and shut down at the end of 1943 after a prisoners' uprising. About 250,000 Jews were killed in Sobibor. Rozett R. - Spector S.: Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, Facts on File, G.G. The Jerusalem Publishing House Ltd. 2000, pg. 412 - 413

## **7 King Petar II (1934-1970)**

born in 1923 to King Alexander I and Queen Marie. He became King on 9th October 1934 upon his father's abdication. He was deposed on 29th November 1945 and died in exile in 1970. 8 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.

## **9 Statni Tajna Bezpecnost**

Czechoslovak intelligence and security service founded in 1948.

## **10 Vyhne labor camp**

in Slovakia. Vyhne was established in early 1940 to house 326 Jewish refugees from Prague who had been imprisoned in Sosnowiec, Poland. The group was brought to Slovakia by Slovak Jewish Center. Vyhne was also turned into a Jewish work center. Jews in Vyhne developed a productive textil industry. In addition, the conditions at the camp were not bad. The prisoners received adequate food rations, the children there had a school, and the inmates were even allowed to leave the camp from time to time. When the Slovak Uprising erupted in August 1944, Vyhne was

liberated. Many of the young inmates left to join the revolt, while most others found refuge in the areas of Slovakia liberated during the uprising. Rozett R. - Spector S.: Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, Facts on File, G.G. The Jerusalem Publishing House Ltd. 2000, pg. 460

## **11 Deportation of Jews from the Slovak State**

The size of the Jewish community in the Slovak State in 1939 was around 89,000 residents (according to the 1930 census - it was around 135,000 residents), while after the I. Vienna Arbitration in November 1938, around 40,000 Jews were on the territory gained by Hungary. At a government session on 24th March 1942, the Minister of the Interior, A. Mach, presented a proposed law regarding the expulsion of Jews. From March 1942 to October 1942, 58 transports left Slovakia, and 57,628 people (2/3 of the Jewish population) were deported. The deportees, according to a constitutional law regarding the divestment of state citizenship, they could take with them only 50 kg of precisely specified personal property. The Slovak government paid Nazi Germany a "settlement" subsidy, 500 RM (around 5,000 Sk in the currency of the time) for each person. Constitutional law legalized deportations. After the deportations, not even 20,000 Jews remained in Slovakia. In the fall of 1944 - after the arrival of the Nazi army on the territory of Slovakia, which suppressed the Slovak National Uprising - deportations were renewed. This time the Slovak side fully left their realization to Nazi Germany. In the second phase of 1944-1945, 13,500 Jews were deported from Slovakia, with about 1000 Jewish persons being executed directly on Slovak territory. About 10,000 Jewish citizens were saved thanks to the help of the Slovak populace. Niznansky, Eduard: Zidovska komunita na Slovensku 1939-1945

## **12 Pan-Slavism**

during the 19th Century an idea of the joining of the Slavic peoples under the rule of the Russian Czar and political efforts related to this, whose significant source was the effort for the independence of Slavic peoples enslaved by the Habsburg monarchy and Turkey. [13](#) Kashrut in eating habits: kashrut means ritual behavior. A term indicating the religious validity of some object or article according to Jewish law, mainly in the case of foodstuffs. Biblical law dictates which living creatures are allowed to be eaten. The use of blood is strictly forbidden. The method of slaughter is prescribed, the so-called shechitah. The main rule of kashrut is the prohibition of eating dairy and meat products at the same time, even when they weren't cooked together. The time interval between eating foods differs. On the territory of Slovakia six hours must pass between the eating of a meat and dairy product. In the opposite case, when a dairy product is eaten first and then a meat product, the time interval is different. In some Jewish communities it is sufficient to wash out one's mouth with water. The longest time interval was three hours - for example in Orthodox communities in Southwestern Slovakia.

## **14 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-Hauptsturmführer 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.

### **15 Slovak National Council of 1918**

was the highest representative organ of the Slovak nation, formed at the time of the dissolution of Austro-Hungary from 12th September in Budapest, and definitively created on 30th October in Turčiansky Svätý Martin on the occasion of the issuance of the historical Declaration of the Slovak Nation (The Martin Declaration) on the Slovaks joining the just-created Czecho-Slovakia. On the authority of Vavro Srobar, representing the interests of Prague in Slovakia, it was forcibly dissolved on 23rd January 1919.

### **16 Derer, Ivan (1884 - 1973)**

Slovak lawyer, politician and journalist. Belonged to the leading supporters of the idea of a unified Czechoslovak nation. He was a member of the Revolutionary National Assembly (14th November 1918 - 15th April 1920) and in the Ministry with power of attorney to administer Slovakia, he was in charge of the department of justice. From 1930 to 1938 he was a member of the National Assembly for the Czechoslovak Socially Democratic Labor Party. After the dissolution of the republic he joined the anti-Fascist resistance in Prague. In 1944 and 1945 he was jailed by the Nazis. During 1946-1948 he was the chairman of the Supreme Court, up until the Communist putsch. From 1954 - 1955 he was jailed by the Communist regime, rehabilitated in 1968.

### **17 Hashomer Hatzair in Slovakia**

the Hashomer Hatzair movement came into being in Slovakia after WWI. It was Jewish youths from Poland, who on their way to Palestine crossed through Slovakia and here helped to found a Zionist youth movement, that took upon itself to educate young people via scouting methods, and called itself Hashomer (guard). It joined with the Kadima (forward) movement in Ruthenia. The combined movement was called Hashomer Kadima. Within the membership there were several ideologues that created a dogma that was binding for the rest of the members. The ideology was based on Borchov's theory that the Jewish nation must also become a nation just like all the others. That's why the social pyramid of the Jewish nation had to be turned upside down. He claimed that the base must be formed by those doing manual labor, especially in agriculture - that is why young people should be raised for life in kibbutzim, in Palestine. During its time of activity it organized six kibbutzim: Shaar Hagolan, Dfar Masaryk, Maanit, Haogen, Somrat and Lehavot Chaviva, whose members settled in Palestine. From 1928 the movement was called Hashomer Hatzair (Young Guard). From 1938 Nazi influence dominated in Slovakia. Zionist youth movements became homes for Jewish youth after their expulsion from high schools and universities. Hashomer Hatzair organized high school courses, re-schooling centers for youth, summer and winter camps. Hashomer Hatzair members were active in underground movements in labor camps, and when the Slovak National Uprising broke out, they joined the rebel army and partisan units. After liberation

the movement renewed its activities, created youth homes in which lived mainly children who returned from the camps without their parents, organized re-schooling centers and branches in towns. After the putsch in 1948 that ended the democratic regime, half of Slovak Jews left Slovakia. Among them were members of Hashomer Hatzair. In the year 1950 the movement ended its activity in Slovakia. [18](#) Slovak Uprising: At Christmas 1943 the Slovak National Council was formed, consisting of various oppositional groups (communists, social democrats, agrarians etc.). Their aim was to fight the Slovak fascist state. The uprising broke out in Banska Bystrica, central Slovakia, on 20th August 1944. On 18th October the Germans launched an offensive. A large part of the regular Slovak army joined the uprising and the Soviet Army also joined in. Nevertheless the Germans put down the riot and occupied Banska Bystrica on 27th October, but weren't able to stop the partisan activities. As the Soviet army was drawing closer many of the Slovak partisans joined them in Eastern Slovakia under either Soviet or Slovak command.

### [19](#) **Stefanik, Milan Rastislav (1880 - 1919)**

Slovak astronomer, politician and a general in the French Army. In 1914 he received from the French government the Order of a Knight of the Honorary Legion for scientific and diplomatic successes. During the years 1913 - 1918 he organized the Czech- Slovak legions in Serbia, Romania, Russia and Italy, and in 1918 the anti- Soviet intervention in Siberia. He died in the year 1919 during an unexplained plane crash during his return to Slovakia. Is buried at a burial mound in Bradlo.

### [20](#) **Martial law**

measures implementing a special legal regime in the entire state, with the goal of suppressing criminal activity. It is characterized by more severe punishments for criminal acts, accelerated legal processes and the suspension of some civil rights and freedoms. It is proclaimed in the case of imminent danger to the state or the safety of citizens, thus during civil war or enemy attack. Courts set up in the case of martial law are designated as martial courts. On Slovak territory, special people's courts set up according to the Benes Decrees of 1945 had the character of these types of courts, in which after a maximum of three days of trial the court senate issued a verdicts. [21](#) 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.

### [22](#) **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.



### **23 Mach, Alexander (1902 - 1980)**

Slovak Fascist politician and journalist. From the year 1936 a member of the HSLS. During 1938-39 he participated in the breaking apart of the CSR, from 1939-44 the main commander of the Hlinka Guards, 1940-45 interior minister of the Slovak State, 1940-44 also the deputy premier. Oriented himself towards close cooperation with Germany. In march 1945 escaped to Austria. Was however returned to the CSR by the Americans. In 1947 sentenced to 30 years in jail, in 1968 given amnesty.

### **24 Gaspar, Tido Jozef (1893 - 1972)**

Slovak journalist, writer, cultural worker, and dramaturgist of the Slovak National Theater. During the Slovak State was the head of the Propaganda Office, a civil servant, ideologist and HSLS politician. Sentenced and jailed for his activities.

### **25 Karmasin, Franz (1910 - 1970)**

from 1926 active in Slovakia, where he was involved as the leader of the Nazi movement within the scope of the German minority, especially the Sudetendeutsche Partei in Slovakia. After 1938 he founded the Deutsche Partei, and became its leader. 1938-1945 Member of Parliament. Member of the SS, agent of the SD. Informed the Germans regarding the solution to the Jewish question in Slovakia, from 1940 requested its radical resolution, and he himself was active in this direction. In 1945 escaped to Germany. In 1948 the People's Court gave him the death penalty in absentia. Died in Germany as a retiree. [26](#) Wisliceny, Dieter (1911 - 1948): was a member of the German Schutzstaffel ("protective squadron") or SS, and a key executioner of the German Final Solution. Joining the NSDAP in 1933, and enlisting in the SS in 1934, Wisliceny eventually rose to the rank of Hauptsturmführer, and after the commencement of the "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem", he was tasked with the ghettoization and liquidation of several important Jewish communities in Nazi-occupied Europe, the most important of which were those of Greece, Hungary and Slovakia. Wisliceny was also the initiator of one notorious innovation - the "Yellow Star" used to mark out Jews from their fellow citizens. Wisliceny was an important witness at the Nuremberg trial hearings, and his testimony would later prove important in the prosecution of Adolf Eichmann for war crimes. Wisliceny was later extradited to Czechoslovakia, where he was tried and hanged for his crimes in February 1948. [27](#) People's and Public schools in Czechoslovakia: In the 18th century the state intervened in the evolution of schools - in 1777 Empress Maria Theresa issued the Ratio Educationis decree, which reformed all levels of education. After the passing of a law regarding six years of compulsory school attendance in 1868, people's schools were fundamentally changed, and could now also be secular. During the First Czechoslovak Republic, the Small School Law of 1922 increased compulsory school attendance to eight years. The lower grades of people's schools were public schools (four years) and the higher grades were council schools. A council school was a general education school for youth between the ages of 10 and 15. Council schools were created in the last quarter of the 19th century as having 4 years, and were usually state-run. Their curriculum was dominated by natural sciences with a practical orientation towards trade and business. During the First Czechoslovak Republic they became 3-year with a 1-year course. After 1945 their curriculum was merged with that of lower gymnasium. After 1948 they disappeared, because all schools were nationalized. [28](#) 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.

## **29 Sudetenland**

Highly industrialized north-west frontier region that was transferred from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the new state of Czechoslovakia in 1919. Together with the land a German-speaking minority of 3 million people was annexed, which became a constant source of tension both between the states of Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, and within Czechoslovakia. In 1935 a nazi-type party, the Sudeten German Party financed by the German government, was set up. Following the Munich Agreement in 1938 German troops occupied the Sudetenland. In 1945 Czechoslovakia regained the territory and pogroms started against the German and Hungarian minority. The Potsdam Agreement authorized Czechoslovakia to expel the entire German and Hungarian minority from the country.

## **30 Hakhsharah**

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

## **31 Dachau**

First Nazi concentration camp. The camp was located in the small German town of Dachau, about 10 miles northwest of Munich. It was established in March 1933 and liberated in April 1945. Altogether, more than 200,000 prisoners passed through the camp, and over 30,000 officially died there, although the true figure is certainly much higher. Rozett R. - Spector S.: Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, Facts on File, G.G. The Jerusalem Publishing House Ltd. 2000, pg. 178 - 179 [32](#) 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.

### **33 Gottwald, Klement (1896 - 1953)**

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.

### **34 PRACA**

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

### **35 Smena [Shift]**

first published in 1948 in Bratislava as a weekly of the Slovak Youth Union. Started being published as a daily in 1953. Along with the daily papers Pravda [Truth] and Praca [Work, or Labor], it belonged during socialist times among the most widely read in Slovakia. Publishing ceased in 1995, and on its "foundations" the daily paper SME was started. [36](#) Warsaw Pact Occupation of Czechoslovakia: The liberalization of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring (1967-68) went further than anywhere else in the Soviet block countries. These new developments was perceived by the conservative Soviet communist leadership as intolerable heresy dangerous for Soviet political supremacy in the region. Moscow decided to put a radical end to the chain of events and with the participation of four other Warsaw Pact countries (Poland, East Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria) ran over Czechoslovakia in August, 1968.

### **37 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.