Magda Frkalova

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Bratislava
Slovakia
Interviewer: Zuzana Slobodnikova
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Mrs. Magdalena Frkalova is a very vital lady, who has decided to give witness about her life and about what she and her immediate family had to live through during the years of the Holocaust. As one of the few that survived the horrors of Fascist activity in Slovakia, she undertook to talk to us about it. And not only it. Also about many other aspects of her family and civilian life. This interview is a description of Jewish life during the 20th century in southern and western Slovakia in the family of a liberally-oriented Jewish farmer, his wife, son and daughter Magdalena - the storyteller.

My family background

My father's father was named Leopold Wohlstein. He was from the village of Krnca, which is located near Topolcany. He was born in 1861, and lived his life around Topolcany. Later he moved along with Grandma Wohlsteinova to the village of Klizske Hradiste, where my father Viliam was born. I don't remember my grandfather much, because he died at around 70 years of age, at the beginning of the 1930s, and at that time I was only five or six years old.

Unfortunately I don't remember my grandmother's name, even now, when I can see her as if she was in front of me. She was born in 1877. She was an excellent woman. She was of shorter build, but as she used to say to us, that was due to her age. When she was young, she really had been taller. She had a slender build and had graying hair. After my grandfather died, she moved to Sladkovicovo, and lived there with her daughter Matilda until 1944. At that time both she and Matilda were deported. As I later found out, when they arrived at Auschwitz, they were both immediately sent into the gas.

I don't know anything about how my grandparents' marriage came about. I'm assuming that it was an arranged marriage. I don't even know exactly in what year and where they were married, but

they ended up having four children. Three sons and a daughter. The boys were named Moric [pron. Moritz], Dezider, Armin and Viliam. Their daughter, as I've already mentioned, was named Matilda. All of my grandparents' children later got married, even though in the end only the three sons had children. Moric had a daughter, Eva, Dezider had two sons named Laco [Ladislav] and Ivan, and Viliam - that is, my father - had a daughter, Magda, so me, and a son, Imrich.

My grandparents, the Wohlsteins, took great care that their children would get an appropriate education. All the boys finished agricultural school in the Hungarian town of Miskolc, because in those days there wasn't any such school in Slovakia. Later all three of them made a living as agricultural superintendents on large farms. Aunt Matilda finished council school and later had a small general store in Sladkovicovo. I know that in my grandparents' family they bought books and had a relatively rich library.

I'd say that financially as well as socially, they belonged to the middle class. This is also why they for example didn't like it when Aunt Matilda fell in love with a Jewish butcher. They didn't allow her to marry him, because to them he seemed inferior and not good enough for their only daughter. So they put her together with a certain Goldstein. The end result was one unhappy marriage. Goldstein turned out to be a relatively frivolous person, who wasn't exactly overly keen on working. No children were born of that marriage. With Uncle Armin it was similar. He was my father's younger brother, who was born in 1895 and in 1930 married a certain Zlatica Fischerova. They lived in Sladkovicovo, and they didn't have any children either.

But I'll return to my grandparents, the Wohlsteins. As far as I know, they weren't overly religious, even though I know that while she lived in Sladkovicovo, my grandmother and her daughter observed certain holidays and regulations. I know that on Saturday evening they'd light candles. They used to say that it was for their parents. And then they, of course, observed and celebrated the High Holidays, like Jewish Easter - Passover and the Day of Atonement - Yom Kippur. I also know that they had a kosher household 1. But I also know that they weren't Orthodox 2.

If I had to provide a simple description of my grandparents, I'd say that they were ordinary people, like anyone else. They dressed like the majority of the population, and acted like them, too. They knew Slovak, Hungarian and German. In those days, being trilingual was normal for many people. Even though I think that their Slovak was the best, and was probably their native tongue.

As I've already mentioned, there were five of us grandchildren, but I think that as the oldest one, I was slightly favored by my grandma. But she loved us all very much. She used to buy us chocolate and took very good care of all of us. She was a very good woman, and I have only the most beautiful memories of her. My grandma's house, where we used to go visit her, was close to the railway station in Sladkovicovo. Her sons had the house built for her, she lived there with my aunt, and they had a little general store there. The house had three rooms. It was furnished very nicely and in a relatively modern fashion, because my grandma already had a bathroom. Otherwise I'm sure that this house didn't differ from other houses built at that time.

If I had to say something about my mother's parents, I'd say that they were very good and kind people. My grandfather was named Moric Haas and my grandmother was named Hana Haasova, née Grünfeldova. As far as dates and various events regarding these grandparents go, I know less than about the Wohlsteins. They lived together in Horna Ves. That's a little village not far from Topolcany. They had a general store.

My grandfather was this mustachioed, gray man, but he didn't wear a beard or even payes. I know that they weren't Orthodox, but how religious he and Grandma were, that I really don't know. All I can with certainty say is that like the Wohlsteins, they also had a kosher household, but to what extent they followed regulations and to what extent they observed various holidays, that I can't say. I know that when my grandmother was 60, she didn't have any gray hair at all. She wore her hair in a bun. She was of smaller build, but very adroit. Simply this spry little person.

She loved us very much. When we visited them, Grandma would always bake excellent cakes. When my brother and I were staying with them during summer holidays, we'd wake up in the morning to the smell of freshly baked cakes that Grandma would bake us for breakfast. As I've already said, she and Grandpa were both excellent people. But in 1942 they were both deported to a concentration camp, and we never met again.

My grandparents had five children. Four daughters and one son. The girls were named Maria - that was my mother and also their oldest daughter, then there was Laura, Olga, Zlatica and a son, Aladar. My grandparents the Haases were also particular about their children getting a proper education. They had a library at home - they bought books and their children attended school. My mother finished council school 3.

My mother's sister Laura got married to a certain Michal Engel. She had two children with him. A daughter, Eva, and a son, Ladislav. Another of my mother's sisters, Olga, married Moric Pal, and they lived together in Subcarpathian Ruthenia 4, in Berehov. They had one daughter, who was also named Eva. My aunt's husband perished during the Holocaust, but she and their daughter Eva managed to survive Auschwitz, where they were from 1943 until liberation. Eva was ten back then, and as if by miracle they both managed to survive that hell on earth. You see, one woman, who was from around Trnava and knew our family, used to help them there. She was there as a block leader ['Blockältester': person in charge of one barrack, or 'block'] and so could help them here and there. My mother's third sister, Zlatica, was named Wolfska after her wedding. She lived in Bratislava, and her husband Vojtech worked for the Phoenix insurance company. They also had one daughter. Her name was Zuzka.

Grandma as well as Grandpa were also trilingual. They spoke Slovak, Hungarian and German. I think that in their case, too, Slovak was their native language. More or less the same, of course, went for their five children.

Growing up

My parents were named Maria Haasova and Viliam Wohlstein. They met at some ball in Topolcany. After a relatively short acquaintance, they were married in 1924. I think that it wasn't the best choice in their lives, because their marriage wasn't a very successful one. They used to argue, and we children were then very unhappy. Indeed, there were even times when my brother and I were quite desperate, and we were even thinking about whom we'd live with, if our parents happened to get divorced. My brother was four years younger than I, and he started with it. He was crying and said: 'Who will we go with? Where will we go when they get divorced?' It really marked our childhood quite a bit. I've got to say, that we weren't very happy. But in the end our parents didn't get divorced and remained together, until the Holocaust separated them.

My mother was a housewife. I think that she was relatively satisfied with being at home, taking care of the household and raising the children. My father supported us by working as a superintendent at various farms.

His first job was at Zlatna na Ostrove. There he worked as a superintendent of one large property. Our mother lived there with him of course. That's also where I was born in 1925, and four years later also my brother, Imrich. I didn't attend nursery school, because our mother was able to take care of us at home, as she wasn't employed anywhere. I don't remember much of the years spent in Zlatna na Ostrove, because I only attended my first three grades of people's school there, and then we moved somewhere else.

I've got to say that life there was nice. We never had any conflicts with neighbors or felt any signs of anti-Semitism. As I've said, I also started attending school here. I attended Slovak people's school here. It was a one- room schoolhouse. From Grade 1 to Grade 5, and there were about two to four students in each grade. There were so few of us because Zlatna na Ostrove was a relatively strong Hungarian village, and Hungarians were in the majority. Even though I've got to say that we never had any problems with them because of it. We took it as a matter of fact.

Now that I've started on school, I can't but recall the teacher who gave me excellent foundations as far as studies go. It was our teacher Mr. Klacansky, and as a teacher he was simply excellent. While I was in school, I liked all subjects. If I'm to be honest, I was better at the humanities, like for example geography or history. In math, I was a little weaker. But never bad. I was always among the best students in school.

After my first three years at Slovak people's school in Zlatna na Ostrove, we moved with our parents to Dolne Krskany. Our father had bought his own farm there, and farmed on it. But the soil there wasn't too fertile, and so after some three years we moved away from Krskany. But before I go on, I'll mention one incident that's remained in my memory all these years. My brother didn't attend school in Parovce, like most of the local Jewish children. We attended school in Nitra. A Protestant school. And once on the way there, it happened that children started yelling at us: 'Jew! Smelly Jew!' It truly didn't sit well with us, and I can't forget it to this day.

Moving to Bolmut

As I already began saying, after about three years, we moved again. My father again began working as a farm superintendent. This time we ended up near Trnava. The farm was named Bolmut, and might've been about five kilometers away from the town. It was a large farm, 340 hectares, and my father employed a relatively large amount of people on it to run it properly. But more on that later. Now I'd still like to finish with regards to my education.

After arriving at Bolmut, my parents registered me at high school in Trnava. It was a Catholic high school, and besides other things, there were nuns teaching there too. I've got to say that they were very good women, and truly never showed anything against Jews. But I can't say that with regards to my classmates. It would happen that my classmates would drop some sort of remark, or that they'd badmouth you. But they never said it to your eyes!

That was in 1939. By that I mean the year I started attending Catholic high school, and also the year that our father had us all converted. As I've already mentioned, he was a liberal - as far as

Judaism as such went. He himself said that already our grandfather, so his father, should have had him converted before 1918. He quite wanted for us to in time have Catholic families and for our children to be more inclined to Catholicism.

I'll end my school years with the year 1941. That year they expelled me as well as many other Jewish students from school 5. Because my parents wanted me to have at least some sort of an education, I then began attending this girls' school, which was devoted to preparing young ladies for family life. There we learned to sew, cook and other household work. It was this family school. Preparation for married life.

My brother, though, attended a Jewish school. He was a very good student, and was very good at school. Imagine that he had a huge liking for Latin. He had a big talent for languages and especially enjoyed Latin. He was able to communicate in it with his teacher, too, and was happy about that. I've also got to add that both my brother and I took private English lessons. For those times that was relatively uncommon, but our parents paid great attention to our education, and tried to give us everything. Our teacher was one lady from Trnava, but I don't remember her name anymore. Besides that, we also attended music school. I played the piano, and Imrich the violin. He was really very good at it. He was a very talented boy indeed.

Besides this, we also had a relatively rich library at home, where we had a number of books of various genres. And of course our family bought newspapers. I know that they were Slovak periodicals, but I don't remember their names anymore. We also played sports. We used to go skiing and later, after the war, I did sports as well.

As far as our stance as such was concerned, we were a Slovak family. As I've already said, it was the mother tongue of both my parents. They also spoke Hungarian between themselves. And that mainly when they wanted to conceal something from us, or when they didn't want us to know about it. They thought we didn't understand it, but my brother and I had somehow caught on to a bit of it from them, and learned Hungarian, and understood everything they said.

As far as religion goes, my father was a liberal. As far as politics went, he was oriented more to the right. He always swore at the Communists, and those opinions and ideas of theirs didn't appeal to him at all. My mother, she wasn't interested in that all. She didn't give a damn about it.

From a religious perspective, we were this interesting family. We didn't have a kosher household. But my brother was circumcised. But no bar mitzvah. On Saturday my mother would also light candles, and she and my father attended synagogue for the High Holidays like Yom Kippur and Passover. But if I'm to be honest, we weren't very religious. And my father didn't even put any effort into it.

Now a little more about that farm in Bolmut that my father used to manage. It measured 340 hectares, and we had eight pairs of horses and fifteen cows there. We didn't have those fifteen cows only for meat, but mainly for milk. My mother, along with one maidservant, made butter from it. He even had a centrifuge for the butter, so we were properly equipped for it. The remaining milk that wasn't used for butter would be taken to a dairy in Trnava.

My father employed one farmer who was his right-hand man, and then several helpers - these were called 'bireshes.' There were eight families of them, and they also lived on the farm. But that

wasn't all. During the spring, when grain and other things were being sown, and also in the summer, during harvest time, my father employed seasonal workers. These seasonal workers were also housed on the farm, and there could even have been as many as 30 of them. On the farm we cultivate grain: wheat, rye, corn and other things. We also had a large onion field, where we grew onions. We also grew beets, which we then sold to a sugar refinery.

My brother and I of course had to help out on the farm. Mainly in the garden, which belonged to the house. We didn't like doing it, and often complained that we didn't even have a summer vacation like other kids. We couldn't go anywhere as long as there was work at home in the garden, or on the farm. And that was almost always. I, for example, helped out with the thresher. The grain would be thrown into it, and it would separate the grains from the chaff; I'd keep track of the amounts. How many sheaves had been thrown into it, and how much grain we had. Later, when I was older, I helped with the payroll for the workers. I'd record how much who worked, and based on that I'd then calculate his wages, which I'd then pay him.

If I'm to be honest, we were a relatively well-off family. We had a car, even though in 1941 the Guardists 6 confiscated it. And then that hell concerning Jews and their progressive transports to the camps 7 began.

During the war

In 1942 I received a summons to Trnava. It was the very first transport which was supposed to leave, supposedly for work. But I refused. I somehow simply didn't believe that we were supposed to go someplace just to work. You see, already at that time I'd heard various rumors that there were camps for Jews in Germany, and that similar ones were being built in Poland as well. It was said that people were dying in them, and that they were even murdering them there. And that wasn't something I wanted. So I decided that I'd run away. My mother was, of course, against it at first, because she thought that by doing so I'd blacken the entire family, and that I'd harm them with it. But my father, who loved me very much, was for my leaving.

So in the end I left for Subcarpathian Ruthenia, to live with my aunt, my mother's sister Olga. I hid at her place for almost a year, and on the cusp of the years 1942 and 1943 I had to return, because the regime had changed there, too, and they'd begun to persecute Jews. Once someone gave my godfather a tip that they'd be rounding up Jews during the night, and so they hid me at the vicarage. There I spent the night, and right the next day I had to set out for home. But my trip home wasn't easy. As I was traveling without any papers, it was very dangerous and difficult. It was already 1943, and the situation was more than complicated.

My godfather drove me to the border, where I was supposed to make contact with some nuns. But they were very reluctant to help, and showed no interest in me at all. That was in Pavlovce [in the district of Vranov nad Toplou], when I asked them how I was to get home. They told me I could simply get on the bus, or train, and that I'd be home right away. That it wasn't a problem. That didn't seem right to me, because before that my godfather had warned me that without papers I shouldn't use public transport at all. He'd warned me that there were checkpoints everywhere, and they could easily catch me. But I was young, and took the nuns' advice.

I got onto the train. That's something that I really shouldn't have done. At the Slovak-Hungarian border the police caught me. They were threatening to hand me over to the Germans. That's

something I didn't want to happen at any cost, and so I tried to wriggle out of it somehow. Luckily they were changing shifts, and one of the new policemen on the Slovak side knew my father. He was from around Trnava, and was very indebted to my father, who'd helped him more than once. He told me that if I succeeded to get away from the policeman on the Hungarian side, he'd help me on the Slovak side, and would help me hide somewhere and get me home somehow.

The problem with the police there was that they weren't able to communicate with each other. The Slovak didn't speak Hungarian, and the Hungarian on the other hand didn't know even a word of Slovak. So I jumped in and somehow convinced the Hungarian policeman to hand me over to the Slovak one. By some miracle I succeeded, and for one week I found a hiding place with one pharmacist in Pavlovce. I was shut up in the bathroom, so that no one would see me. That Slovak policeman arranged that for me. In the meantime, he'd called my father to tell him about me, and they were trying to get me away from there.

At that time my father hadn't yet been deported, as he had a presidential exception 8, but on the other hand, he wasn't able to move about Slovakia freely. Each Jew had his assigned territory that he couldn't leave. So my father decided that he'd send one traveling salesman for me. He was this salesman that offered and sold goods all over Slovakia. My father gave him 20,000 crowns to pay the Slovak policeman for helping me, and also for finding me a hiding place. [Editor's note: The value of one Slovak crown during the time of the Slovak State (1939-1945) was equal to 31.21 mg of gold. The exchange rate between the German mark and the Slovak crown was artificially set at 1:11.]

The salesman took me with him and brought me home. I won't say any more about the hardships of this trip, but will just say that he was one lewd man, who made passes at me, and I didn't have a good feeling from it. Upon my return home, everything had changed. On the one hand, my parents were glad to have me home, but on the other hand my mother was afraid of what would happen if someone found out that I'd returned now. She was afraid, and so wanted me to leave as soon as possible, so that I wouldn't cause them any more problems than necessary.

So again my father took care of it. He knew this one railway worker in Bratislava, who lived on what today is Sancova Street. I moved into his home. To be less conspicuous, I had my hair bleached blond. I started working for a company named Vatra. It was a company that owned forests and sold wood to Germany. There I filled in various invoices and did office work. But before I could have a job, I had to have papers. False ones, of course. The railway man I lived with put me in touch with the forger. He told me where I'd find him and how much it cost. The forger then made me false papers in the name Polakovicova, and in them it said that I was from Snina. He left me my first name, so that I wouldn't get confused. I don't know anymore exactly how much he asked for it back then, but I know that it was quite a lot of money.

Once I was walking along the street in Bratislava, and met a former classmate of mine. And despite my bleached hair, she recognized me right away. 'You're Magda, aren't you? You're Jewish, aren't you? And you've got bleached hair?' Really, I'll tell you, some of those girls were capable of being quite mean...

After some time, however, the neighbors began asking the railway man and his family who I was and what I was. The situation began to be dangerous, for them as well as for me. One family friend of ours advised me that the wisest thing would be for me to move. So I decided that I'd find

something through the classified ads. At that time Bratislava was already being bombed, and many people were leaving the city and renting out their apartments. So I answered one ad and rented a room on Grosslingova Street. So there I then lived alone. But only for a very short time. Because in the meantime, they'd caught my father.

As I've already said, my father had a presidential exception. That meant that he was at home for the time being, and not taken away to a camp somewhere, but neither was he able to freely move about wherever he wanted. Well, and one day my father set out for Trnava. He wanted to see what was new, what was going on. Someone there recognized him, and denounced him. Right away, people flocked to him and that was it! They then escorted him to Banska Bystrica to the Gestapo, and there they gave him a terrible beating. I heard this from one friend of ours afterwards, how it had all happened. When they'd suddenly caught my father, my mother and brother took fright and went to hide out in Hlohovec, at the house of one of our maids who'd worked for us for years. But they didn't stay in Hlohovec for long, because at that time they were already putting up posters everywhere that whoever was hiding Jews or partisans should report it and hand them over. And our maid was afraid. She preferred to not have them there.

So my mother decided that they'd come to Bratislava to be with me, that I'd take care of them, that I had to help them. When they arrived, my brother had bloody hands and calluses from the work the woman in Hlohovec had made him do. Because she also had beet fields, and the poor guy had to work in them. When they arrived, his hands were completely mangled. So I quickly thought about what to do. I took my brother to the state hospital and they dressed his wounds. He went to have them treated every day until they improved. But they were healing slowly, and my mother wasn't trying to be inconspicuous in any way. She was wearing a folk costume, and was drawing unnecessary attention with it. And she wouldn't take it off for anything, because she claimed that it was protecting her!

My friends had advised me that we shouldn't all live together. So I found them a sublet in one house near the castle. My mother wanted me to take care of her and my brother, it being my obligation. It was a relatively expensive place. Everywhere hung posters that whoever turns in a Jew will get 10,000 crowns, and one lady found my mother suspicious. She was constantly walking around in that outfit, wasn't working anywhere, and lived in that expensive apartment along with my brother. So she informed on them. A Guardist along with another man came to see my mother at the apartment. They interrogated my mother and everything would perhaps have turned out fine, if they wouldn't have made my brother take off his pants. They saw that he was circumcised, and immediately all was betrayed. It was immediately clear that their papers were false, and that they were Jews.

Then everything took place quickly. At the Gestapo they asked my mother where her husband and her other children were. So she told them that her husband had already been taken away, and that her daughter was in Bratislava. She didn't know where I lived, but my brother knew. I'd told him, because my mother had pressured both of us, that if we were going to keep everything from her, she'd jump under a streetcar. So my brother softened me up me and I told him my address. I shouldn't have done that. They would never have found me. But at the Gestapo they began to beat him, and he told them where I lived. It was already nighttime, and I heard some steps coming up the stairs. I heard the jackboots kicking. It was midnight, and I knew that they were looking for me. I'll never forget that date: it was 13th October 1944.

After being jailed at the Gestapo in Bratislava, my mother, my brother Imrich and I were transported to Sered 9. That was 15th October; we'd been in jail for two days. At the time my brother was only 15. He was still this half-child. We were in the Sered camp for only two days, because the transports were constantly departing from there. So they sent all three of us to Auschwitz. But there they didn't accept us. They loaded us into cattle wagons again and sent us to Berlin. In Berlin they separated us. The men and women were separated. That's the last time in my life that I saw my brother Imrich. It was horrible.

We were in the wagons like that for eight days. The conditions were horrible. Many of our fellow sufferers already went insane on the way there. Older people were already dying during the trip. Some people threw us bread as the train passed by. At the border, when the train was standing still, they stuck a piece of bread through these little windows, and that's all we had to eat. From Berlin they transported us by train to the Ravensbrück concentration camp 10. There our suffering continued. It was a concentration camp, where they also cremated. Every night the chimneys there were burning. Dead bodies were being burned in ovens, and there was a terribly sweet smell. Once, a transport from Hungary arrived. People arrived on that train in desolate shape, barefoot, and right away they sent them to their deaths.

My mother and I were together the whole time. When we arrived there, she was only 40, and so they left us together. I tried to survive in all sorts of ways. I ate everything they gave us. Soup, if you could call it that. They made it from turnips, beets or potato peels, and there was even sand in it. But if you want to survive, you don't care. I terribly wanted to live, I wanted to survive and so I also forced my mother to eat as well. But she didn't try very hard. At the end, she weighted only about 40 kilos! It was truly terrible in the camps. Terrible.

The German women that were guarding us were horrible. I tried to speak as little German as possible, so as to not draw unnecessary attention to myself. But it also happened that once as I was working a German woman looked at my hands and said to me: 'You've wearing nail polish? Where did you get it?' But I of course wasn't wearing any nail polish, my nails were simply shiny. So that's also what I told her. She beat my hands and fingers. Or it also happened, and fairly often, that they'd unwrap their food in front of us, and would parade in front of us and show us how they're eating fresh bread and other things. It was horrible, because we didn't have a bite to eat, and were very starved.

But alas, we prisoners also didn't get along very well with each other. The older women, who'd been there from 1942, were already these sort of block leaders, and for example issued food rations. So the ones that wanted to push their way to the front, or asked for more food, would be beaten, even with the ladle they were using to dole out the food. As I've already said, the food there was terrible, and in short supply. I know that for Christmas we got a piece of bread, and I also know that I found it terribly delicious there. Well, and for New Year's we got a meatball.

For New Year's 1945, the Germans made up a story that we'd been singing. But that wasn't true at all. We had no desire to even think about anything like singing. They punished us, of course. They had us stand for roll call for two days straight. It was very cold, and snowing. No one had any socks, nor good shoes, not to mention clothing. My only luck was that I had wooden shoes, which protected me a bit against the freezing cold and damp. Otherwise these roll calls took place every day. Many, many people couldn't handle it and died right there. The cold was terrible, we had no

hair, because they'd shaved us bald as soon as we'd arrived, or cut our hair very short, and the clothes we had were useless. They were horrible.

One day they sent us on a death march 11. We walked for several days. We were walking to some harbor town. Those that couldn't handle it were dying on the way, or the Germans themselves were killing them when they saw that they were exhausted. They were throwing their bodies just like that into the ditch by the road. We got little rest, and when we did, they stopped somewhere by a swamp. We were so exhausted that we lay down even there.

But one night the SS soldiers disappeared, and all we found were their uniforms left at the side of the road. They took things that the prisoners had had with them, and ran away. They knew that the Allies were approaching, and didn't want to be caught. So in the end we never got anywhere. Lucky for us, too. Because later, some decades after, I once read in the paper that those that arrived in the harbor towns were burned alive.

So that's how our stay in Ravensbrück ended. So we set out for home. I weighed around 50 kilos, and my mother was emaciated, and had only around 40 kilos. But nothing worked anywhere. We didn't know what to do. So 14 of us got together and set out for home. In one German town they stopped us, that we couldn't go any further, as the Russians were approaching. As long as we were meeting American soldiers, they weren't taking any notice of us. But when the Russians arrived, they wouldn't leave us alone. On our way home, we passed many empty houses, and we spent the night in one of them. Some Russians arrived as well. So right away I told my mother that we should go sleep up in the attic, in the straw. It's a good thing we did. Because in the morning, when we woke up, the others told us that those disgusting Russian soldiers had raped them.

The Russians then told us that we couldn't continue onwards because we were spreading typhus. That was of course not true. But they needed someone to work for them. There were 14 of us women, and they had us sew uniforms for them. About four of us knew how to use a sewing machine, and while we sewed the uniforms, the rest sewed on buttons and so on. Well, it was quite bad. What else can I say.

These Russians were a motorized brigade and were soon supposed to go home. So as the leader of our group of women, I went to the captain and asked him if we couldn't go along with them. He told me that they'd only be going to the border, and so I asked him if they wouldn't at least take us that far. They took us to As. There at the border they asked us right away if we were Czechs. But we weren't. We were all only Slovak women. They said that Czechs had priority as far as getting to Prague went. But when no one else arrived, they ended up taking us to Prague. From Prague it was then relatively easy. We got to Slovakia, to Bratislava, and from there my mother and I returned home to Bolmut.

Our return

Our return home was a disillusionment. Everything had been stolen. An Aryanizer was living there with his family, and he was evidently not enthused about our return. [Aryanization: the transfer of Jewish stores, businesses, companies, etc. to the ownership of another, non-Jewish person - the Aryanizer.] We didn't even have any proper clothes, just what we had from the concentration camp. So we finally remembered that while he'd still been at home, my father had delivered some beets to the sugar refinery, and didn't have them pay him right away, but told the director to pay

him after the war, so that we'd have something to live on. My father was a very foresighted and practical person. He thought of everything. So my mother and I set out to see the director. He paid us the money immediately, and we bought some decent clothing with it.

We moved to Nitra. My mother and I rented an apartment there. We were waiting for my father and brother to return. Like others, we also pasted up their pictures at the railway and bus station. Several people contacted us, who claimed that they recognized my father and told us various versions of his death. But in the end neither my father nor my brother returned.

I found out what had happened to my brother only ten years ago. After they'd separated us in Berlin, men and women separately, his path continued on to some coal mines. I don't know exactly where, but I do know that he was digging in a mine. In 1945, when the English were bombing Germany, they thought that there were Germans hiding in those mines, and bombed them. That's where Imrich died.

We had several pieces of information about my father, but they differed. There were also three versions of his death. The first said that he was working in that 'Sonderkommando' [commando responsible for carrying the dead out of the gas chambers and their cremation] in Auschwitz, where he was burning corpses, and that after three months they killed him as well. The second version was also that he'd been in Auschwitz, but that when the Russians were already approaching, the Germans drove them out on a death march, and he wasn't able to handle it and died during its course. The third version said that my father had asked some SS soldier for water, who saw that my father had gold teeth. He told him to give him the gold teeth and he'd give him water. My father didn't give them to him, and so he killed him. So that's it. I don't know which version is the truth. Maybe the truth is somewhere in between.

Back again to our return. We were on the one hand immensely happy that we'd survived, but as we were waiting for my father and brother, we started realizing that they probably hadn't survived. People's reactions to our return home weren't the best either. They were amazed at how come it was that we'd returned. They acted all awkward. It happened, for example, that I saw one girl in my own clothes that I'd had before the war, and I had to wear the ones from the concentration camp...

After some time I moved from Nitra to Bratislava. During the 1945/46 school year, I applied to a high school on Grosslingova Street. I wanted to finish my education and graduate. In 1947 I succeeded. I left two years for my studies, because I was afraid that it would have been too much for me in one year. I was quite badly off back then; I was sad for my father and brother and was still grieving for them.

After graduation in 1947, I wanted to take pharmacy. But my family and mainly my mother didn't like the idea. She wanted me to get married as soon as possible and take care of her. Because she didn't want to go to work, even though she was only a bit over 40 and was healthy. That made me so angry that I decided that I'd marry the first man who'd take care of me financially, and enable me to study. I also very much wanted to be independent.

Married life

In Piestany I met one Moravian man from Kromeriz. He was 14 years older than I. It wasn't long before I married. So in 1947 I married Frantisek Ferbert. Our wedding was an ordinary one. Just at

city hall. Neither one of us insisted on a Jewish ceremony, though we were both Jews. He was a Jew, and he'd also survived a concentration camp. He was a leather salesman. But our marriage was a mistake. In the end, he was against me studying. But I arranged it despite his objections, and graduated from Pharmacy at a university in Brno. That was from 1948 to 1953. During my studies there, I met my second husband. He was also studying in Brno, law and music science. But we were just friends. There was nothing more between us. He knew that I was married, and our relationship was just a friendship.

My husband and I had two children while we were married. About a year after the wedding we had a son. That was in 1948, and I named him after my father, Viliam. Next our daughter was born in 1956, and we gave her the name Marta. My husband had this period when he wanted to leave with me and the children for Israel. He was quite pro-Israeli. But I didn't want to go. How would we have lived? After all, he had no trade.

He was this odd fish. He always left everything to me. I took care of the children, of the household, of everything. All he was interested in was soccer. He always said that after all I'd manage, and that I'd arrange everything. Well, and the final straw was when my mother moved to Kromeriz to live with us. As always, she didn't help me, but my husband. She always took his side, and that upset me greatly. She always had to be right. We cooked what she wanted, and everything had to be according to her. Many times I didn't have the strength to argue with her. At that time I was already working in a pharmacy, and it was shift work. I either worked from morning till evening, or had the night shift. When I was finally at home, I was glad to be able to be with the children. I used to take them to the park and for walks. My husband of course didn't join us, because how would it look if he walked around with a carriage and kids?

Finally my husband and I were divorced in 1957. I'd inherited a house from my grandmother in Slakdovicovo, and had some finances to be able to be independent. After divorcing my husband, I lived in Kromeriz for another three years, because I wasn't able to find a job in Slovakia. But finally I managed it, and in 1960 I began working at the Faculty of Pharmacy in Bratislava.

So I moved here with the children, into the apartment where I live to this day, and worked at that faculty. I stayed there for six and a half years. Then I worked for ten years as the manager of a pharmacy. I left there in 1976, and worked in another pharmacy for another ten years. In 1986 I retired. In the pharmacy we were all women, and it was a relatively good collective. Each one of us had children. One had to run to daycare, another to kindergarten, and a third to school. But we got along quite well. When I was already working close to home here, I got to know everyone. More than once it happened that people stopped on the street and asked me about medicine and how to take it. And it even still happens to me to this day.

As far as indications of anti-Semitism are concerned, those I met up with while I was in Czech. They used to say about me - that Slovak - that Jew. I, of course, knew about it, and here and there it saddened me. But here in Slovakia I didn't meet up with it very much anymore.

Back to my personal life again. I married my second husband in 1962. As I've already said, he was a friend of mine from my university days. We liked each other. After my divorce, he used to come visit me here in Bratislava. So after some time we got married. We had a civil wedding. My husband isn't a Jew, but a Catholic. After a year we had a son. My third child. My husband graduated from law in Brno, and also pedagogy, esthetics. During that also conservatory; he

played the saxophone and clarinet. My husband had a very good head for learning. During his studies he had a stipend, because he was from poor and very modest means; that however didn't deter him, I'd say that precisely the opposite. After moving to Bratislava he got a job at the National Theater.

As far as politics and the regime back then are concerned, I also joined the Communist Party 12. That was still during my first marriage. My husband was persuading me to, and I finally agreed. Well, and then I remained a member, because the children wanted to study and getting into university without your parents being party members simply wasn't possible. Though I never went to any meetings, I was a passive party member. Like many others.

My husband traveled a lot for his work. But we never succeeded in all going somewhere together. Except for vacations by the seaside. Those we used to go on. My children, as opposed to me, enjoyed their vacations. They didn't have to work in the garden or in the fields like me. All I'll add about my children is that they managed to finish their studies, and now each has his own life. They have children and we're content grandparents. I won't say any more about them, because people are bad today, too...

In closing I'll add that after many years I returned to Judaism. I'm glad when we meet at the Community and all talk amongst ourselves. We're connected by a common fate and what we all lived through. I'm a member more for this moral and social reason. We don't observe any customs anymore. My children and grandchildren know what I lived through. They know who they are. But they weren't brought up in the spirit of Jewish tradition. Neither my children nor their children. They're aware of it, and that's enough. I just hope, and wish with all my heart that the things that took place during the Holocaust are never again repeated. For my family to not have to suffer as I and my loved ones suffered.

Glossary

1 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.

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. In 1896, there were 294 Orthodox mother-communities and 1,001 subsidiary communities registered all over Hungary, mainly in Transylvania and in the north-eastern part of the country,. In 1930, the 136 mother-communities and 300 subsidiary communities made up 30.4 percent of all Hungarian Jews. This number increased to 535 Orthodox communities in 1944, including 242,059 believers (46 percent).

3 People's and Public schools in Czechoslovakia

In the 18th century the state intervened in the evolution of schools - in 1877 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.

4 Subcarpathian Ruthenia

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

5 Jewish Codex

Order no. 198 of the Slovakian government, issued in September 1941, on the legal status of the Jews, went down in history as Jewish Codex. Based on the Nuremberg Laws, it was one of the most stringent and inhuman anti-Jewish laws all over Europe. It paraphrased the Jewish issue on a racial basis, religious considerations were fading into the background; categories of Jew, Half Jew, moreover 'Mixture' were specified by it. The majority of the 270 paragraphs dealt with the transfer

of Jewish property (so-called Aryanizing; replacing Jews by non-Jews) and the exclusion of Jews from economic, political and public life.

6 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.

7 Deportation of Jews from the Slovak State

The size of the Jewish community in the Slovak State in 1939 was around 89,000 residents (according to the 1930 census - it was around 135,000 residents), while after the I. Vienna Decision in November 1938, around 40,000 Jews were on the territory gained by Hungary. At a government session on 24th March 1942, the Minister of the Interior, A. Mach, presented a proposed law regarding the expulsion of Jews. From March 1942 to October 1942, 58 transports left Slovakia, and 57,628 people (2/3 of the Jewish population) were deported. The deportees, according to a constitutional law regarding the divestment of state citizenship, could take with them only 50 kg of precisely specified personal property. The Slovak government paid Nazi Germany a "settlement" subsidy, 500 RM (around 5,000 Sk in the currency of the time) for each person. Constitutional law legalized deportations. After the deportations, not even 20,000 Jews remained in Slovakia. In the fall of 1944 - after the arrival of the Nazi army on the territory of Slovakia, which suppressed the Slovak National Uprising - deportations were renewed. This time the Slovak side fully left their realization to Nazi Germany. In the second phase of 1944-1945, 13,500 Jews were deported from Slovakia, with about 1000 Jewish persons being executed directly on Slovak territory. About 10,000 Jewish citizens were saved thanks to the help of the Slovak populace.(Source: Niznansky, Eduard: Zidovska komunita na Slovensku 1939- 1945, http://www.holocaust.cz/cz2/resources/texts/niznansky_komunita)Niznansky, Eduard: Zidovska komunita na Slovensku 1939-1945)

8 Exemption and exceptions in the Slovak State (1939-1945)

In the Jewish Codex they are included under § 254 and § 255. Exemption and exceptions, § 255 - the President of the Slovak Republic may grant an exemption from the stipulations of this decree. Exemption may be complete or partial and may be subject to conditions. Exemption may be revoked at any time. In the case of exemption, administrative fees are collected according to § 255 in the following amounts: a) for the granting of an exception according to § 1, the sum of 1,000 to 500,000 Ks b) for the granting of an exception according to § 2, the sum of 500 to 100,000 Ks c) for the granting of an exception according to single or multiple decrees, the sum of 10 Ks to 300,000 Ks d) a certificate issued according to § 3 is charged at 10 Ks § 255 enabled the President to grant exceptions from decrees for a fee. Disputes are still led regarding how this paragraph got into the Jewish Codex and how many exceptions the President granted. According to documents there were 1111 Jews protected by exceptions, including family members. Exceptions were valid from the commencement of deportations from the territory of the Slovak State, in 1942, up until the outbreak of the Slovak National Rebellion, in the year 1944.

9 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.

10 Ravensbrück

Concentration camp for women near Fürstenberg, Germany. Five hundred prisoners transported there from Sachsenhausen began construction at the end of 1938. They built 14 barracks and service buildings, as well as a small camp for men, which was completed separated from the women's camp. The buildings were surrounded by tall walls and electrified barbed wire. The first deportees, some 900 German and Austrian women were transported there on 18th May 1939, soon followed by 400 Austrian Gypsy women. At the end of 1939, due to the new groups constantly arriving, the camp held nearly 3000 persons. With the expansion of the war, people from twenty countries were taken here. Persons incapable of working were transported on to Uckermark or Auschwitz, and sent to the gas chambers, others were murdered during 'medical' experiments. By the end of 1942, the camp reached 15,000 prisoners, by 1943, with the arrival of groups from the Soviet Union, it reached 42,000. During the working existence of the camp, altogether nearly 132,000 women and children were transported here, of these, 92,000 were murdered. In March of 1945, the SS decided to move the camp, so in April those capable of walking were deported on a death march. On 30th April 1945, those who survived the camp and death march, were liberated by the Soviet armies.

11 Death march

In fear of the approaching Allied armies, the Germans tried to erase all evidence of the concentration camps. They often destroyed all the facilities and forced all Jews regardless of their age or sex to go on a death march. This march often led nowhere and there was no specific destination. The marchers received neither food nor water and were forbidden to stop and rest at night. It was solely up to the guards how they treated the prisoners, if and what they gave them to eat and they even had in their hands the power on the prisoners' life or death. The conditions during the march were so cruel that this journey became a journey that ended in the death of most marchers.

12 Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC)

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