

# Matilda Hrabovecka

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## My family background

I was born into an Orthodox Jewish family, which had several rabbis, in Presov region. My mother Dorota Friedmannova, nee Weil, was born in 1886 and came from Poland. My father Jozef Friedmann came from Stropkov and was quite well off. He was born in 1884.

My maternal grandfather's surname was Weil. I don't know his first name. He was born in Jaslo, Poland, and died before World War II, in the 1930s.

I would say our family was rather bohemian, although the men grew beards and were religious. My father was also religious; he graduated from a yeshivah, but I remember seeing him, when he thought nobody could, turn on the radio on Saturday, although this was considered work.

## Growing up

My parents had eight children, me being the youngest. My two older sisters were Lujza and Anna or Anusa. Both worked and supported the family. Lujza was the oldest. She was born in Presov in 1910. Before World War II she finished an accounting course. She was deported to Auschwitz with the last transport in 1942, along with her husband, Bela Wohlwert, and in December, during the last selection, she was sent to the gas chambers. She spent three months in the concentration camp. Her husband was also killed in Auschwitz in 1942.

Anusa was born in 1912, also in Presov. She was good at music and played the violin. She married Sandor Abrahamovic in 1937. He was born in Presov in 1905. Before the war he worked as a shop-keeper. She was killed in Lublin ghetto in 1942 at the age of 30. Anusa and Sandor had a son, Herbert, who was born in Presov in 1938. He was deported to Treblinka, where he died at the age of four. My youngest sister, Alzbeta, was born in

Presov in 1926. She was killed in Treblinka in 1942, only 18 years old.

My mother was the one who took care of the family, not only by keeping the household, but also by trying to help financially, which wasn't really common at that time. Our family wasn't very well-off because my father got involved in a rather dubious business with gas stations and went bankrupt, although one could argue that his bankruptcy was mainly the consequence of his gambling habit; he liked to play cards. Despite their poverty my parents tried really hard to provide education for all of us.

My oldest brother, Bernardt, left for France to stay with his uncle. My younger brother, Henrich, became a locksmith, and the rest of us, girls, attended a Neolog [1](#) school and later on a gymnasium. All the siblings worked hard to support the family.

The Presov Neolog school was mainly attended by students from more well-to-do families, thus I experienced the meaning of social differences in my early years, which motivated me to join the Hashomer Hatzair [2](#) and later the Communist Youth Organization.

Hashomer Hatzair was very important to everyone in our group of youngsters. My youngest sister Alzbeta would go there with me, and the Kamenski brothers, Pali and Lori, also came. Lori was really smart and quite talented in school. He didn't survive the camps. Except for Rosenberg Imrich, who was in Theresienstadt [3](#) during World War II, all the others from our Hashomer Hatzair group were killed during the Holocaust.

I really loved going to school, mainly because we had wonderful teachers. The headmaster's name was Svarc; we all loved him and referred to him as 'Svarc bacsi' [Uncle Svarc]. Then there was Mr. Reich, who was teaching religion and Hebrew and then our class-teacher Mrs. Kleinova. She was the mother of Professor Fischer, who taught in the physics department. It's a sad thing to mention that from all the people I went to school with, only about eleven survived. The others were killed during the Holocaust.

In 1939, when the first anti-Jewish legislation [see Anti-Jewish laws in Hungary] [4](#) started to be introduced, I was learning to become a tailor. Unfortunately, I never learned very much since they used to have me do all sorts of odd jobs instead.

My sister Malvina, or Mancsi, was born in Presov in 1920. She graduated from a high school, then we stopped going to school because of the anti-Jewish measures. I went to work for a wood seller, who was Jewish and for whom my sister was also supposed to work. But my father sent me without her and Mancsi stayed home. He was always worried about her, since she was so beautiful.

## **During the war**

In 1942 they drafted me as the first member of my family and I was deported in the first wave. One of my cousins fled to the Soviet Union. Later we found out that he died in one of the Gulag [5](#) camps, so his escape from the fascists didn't help him.

We left Presov for Poprad by train. It was my first trip on a train, and I thought of the irony of life, whether this train trip was also to be my last one. The people in Presov were horrified by what was happening to us, Jews, but already in Poprad the atmosphere changed completely: Slovak guards were beating us like crazy. They loaded us onto cattle cars and transported us to Auschwitz.

My sister Manci went to the gas chamber along with my parents. It makes me cry when I remember what a cute little thing she was, with those blue eyes and dark hair. I really loved her. Sometimes I think of her, even today, when I see her friend Katka Hexnerova, who lives in Kosice now.

### **Surviving Auschwitz**

I spent three years in Auschwitz, full of suffering, selections and finally a death march out of the camp. While I was in Auschwitz, I found out that my friend from Hashomer Hatzair, Halmos Nusi, was there. Halmos came from a rather wealthy family. Her parents had divorced years ago; she was an only child, and, I would say, she was spoiled. She was sick as soon as she arrived in this hell, and was taken to see a doctor because she was complaining about a sore throat. Poor Halmos was dead even before they took the rest of her group to Birkenau, but I don't know exactly what happened.

I could say that because of the horrors I witnessed, I developed my own philosophy for staying alive in such a hell. To be frank, I find it painful to say what that philosophy is today. The things I went through in Auschwitz influenced my whole life: I always avoided standing in the back of any group, or on the side. And I would never stand in the front, either, so that I would never be seen as not being part of the crowd. And in Auschwitz I survived, in fact, to the detriment of those who happened to be standing on the sides. To put it bluntly, that means every survivor lives on the grave of someone else, and I still find this hard to deal with.

From my entire family, my parents and sisters were all murdered along with a number of relatives—even my four-year-old nephew Herbert. I survived along with my sister Blanka and brother Bernardt. After I returned to Slovakia, I realized at once how much my way of thinking and my values had changed after three years spent in hell.

### **My return to Slovakia**

It took me some time to come back. I took the last repatriation bus and arrived in Neustvelica, near Neubrandenburg. I came back to Prague, but was

scared of the disappointments I knew were waiting for me at home. I didn't know what to expect from those people and what freedom meant.

On the way, several Yugoslav women were trying to convince me to go home with them, but I decided to go to Presov first and see if anybody had survived. My sister was working as a clerk, and amazingly, she had somehow managed to escape the concentration camp. I didn't blame her for that, but she was nothing but a huge disappointment after keeping me waiting until her lunch break! I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive her for failing to understand what I had gone through.

I had too many ideals about the Slovak National Uprising [6](#) and everybody who took part in it; everything seemed to be perfect to me. Suddenly, I idealized the whole society and the situation that we were living in, although I was worried about the future.

Then I enrolled in high school. I crammed four years into one year and graduated in Kosice. But, it wasn't all so nice and easy. I was really poor. I didn't even go to my own sister's wedding because I had nothing nice, or even decent, to wear.

And, anti-Semitism wasn't exactly dead. Once I lined up for lunch tickets at work. The line was long, and when people saw the number on my arm, they said, 'Look at this Jewish woman. Hitler didn't manage to kill them all; more of them came back than there were before!' I was horribly upset and ran to the police to report it, hoping that this would be a solitary incident. Evidently, my view of life was very distorted then, I'm sorry to say.

## **Married life**

I continued with my education and studied in Prague later on, where I met and married a Jewish man from Presov, Mikulas Hrabovecky, who survived the Holocaust in Slovakia. I married a Jewish man because I wanted to avoid being called stinking kike when I became an old woman. If your spouse isn't Jewish, you can never be sure that he won't call you names during some crisis.

After school, my husband Mikulas and I moved to Bratislava, where I joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia [7](#) and became a civil servant. My status changed for the worse during the personality cult in the fifties, when my brother, a convinced communist and party member, ended up being imprisoned.

Nowadays, after my retirement, I take care of my granddaughters. I have two wonderful daughters Katka and Viera, and they, along with their children Zuzka, Nina, Jozef and Daniel, are the joy of my life. I'm also involved in the Documentation Center of the Holocaust, which I helped establish. I

wrote a book of memoirs on my time in Auschwitz.

## Glossary

### **1 Neolog Jewry**

Following a Congress in 1868/69 in Budapest, where the Jewish community was supposed to discuss several issues on which the opinion of the traditionalists and the modernizers differed and which aimed at uniting Hungarian Jews, Hungarian Jewry was officially split into two (later three) communities, which all built up their own national community network. The Neologs were the modernizers, who opposed the Orthodox on various questions.

### **2 Hashomer Hatzair**

'The Young Watchman'; A Zionist-socialist pioneering movement founded in Eastern Europe, Hashomer Hatzair trained youth for kibbutz life and set up kibbutzim in Palestine. During World War II, members were sent to Nazi-occupied areas and became leaders in Jewish resistance groups. After the war, Hashomer Hatzair was active in 'illegal' immigration to Palestine.

### **3 Terezin/Theresienstadt**

A ghetto in the Czech Republic, run by the SS. Jews were transferred from there to various extermination camps. It was used to camouflage the extermination of European Jews by the Nazis, who presented Theresienstadt as a 'model Jewish settlement'. Czech gendarmes served as ghetto guards, and with their help the Jews were able to maintain contact with the outside world. Although education was prohibited, regular classes were held, clandestinely. Thanks to the large number of artists, writers, and scholars in the ghetto, there was an intensive program of cultural activities. At the end of 1943, when word spread of what was happening in the Nazi camps, the Germans decided to allow an International Red Cross investigation committee to visit Theresienstadt. In preparation, more prisoners were deported to Auschwitz, in order to reduce congestion in the ghetto. Dummy stores, a cafe, a bank, kindergartens, a school, and flower gardens were put up to deceive the committee.

### **4 Anti-Jewish laws in Hungary**

Following similar legislation in Nazi Germany, Hungary enacted three Jewish laws in 1938, 1939 and 1941. The first law restricted the number of Jews in industrial and commercial enterprises, banks and in certain occupations, such as legal, medical and engineering professions, and journalism to 20% of the total number. This

law defined Jews on the basis of their religion, so those who converted before the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, as well as those who fought in World War I, and their widows and orphans were exempted from the law. The second Jewish law introduced further restrictions, limiting the number of Jews in the above fields to 6%, prohibiting the employment of Jews completely in certain professions such as high school and university teaching, civil and municipal services, etc. It also forbade Jews to buy or sell land and so forth. This law already defined Jews on more racial grounds in that it regarded baptized children that had at least one non-converted Jewish parent as Jewish. The third Jewish law prohibited intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, and defined anyone who had at least one Jewish grandparent as Jewish.

## **5 Gulag**

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

## **6 Slovak National Uprising or 1944 Uprising was an armed insurrection organized by the Slovak resistance during World War II**

Its aim was to overthrow the collaborationist Slovak State of Jozef Tiso. The insurrection was defeated by Nazi Germany.

## **7 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.