

# Liselotte Teltscherova

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Interviewer: Eva Pressburgerova

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Mrs. Teltscherova is a very kind woman, very open and friendly. Despite being 82 she is still very active and seems to be very fit, apart from the fact that she does not hear very well. She lives alone in an apartment building about thirty minutes from the city center. Her apartment is not very big, but it is cozy with old furniture and photographs of her family in a large bookcase. Mrs. Teltscherova also has a cat.

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## Family background

I didn't know my paternal grandparents. They died before I was born. My paternal grandfather's name was Bernard Teltscher. He was born in Mikulov and spent all his life there. He was a wine wholesaler - I think our family's wine-shop was founded by him. He died in Mikulov, but I don't know when. My paternal grandmother's name was Johanna Teltscherova, nee Spitzerova. She came from Miroslav and moved to Mikulov after her marriage with my grandfather. My grandparents' mother tongue was German. They weren't orthodox, but they were religious. They kept a kosher household and celebrated the holidays because it was common in those times. I don't know any details though since this was before I was born.

My grandparents had eleven children, my father was the second youngest. My grandmother died just after she had given birth to the youngest boy. Later they had a stepmother, whom they loved very much. My father had many brothers. One of them was killed during World War I, one had died before I was born. Two of them, Robert and Oskar, lived in Vienna. We met them quite often both in Mikulov and Vienna. One of my father's brothers lived in Brno. His name was Evzen. The others lived in Mikulov and worked in the wine-shop. Their names were Richard, Felix and Jan.

Richard was a Zionist and a member of the Jewish Party during the First Republic [First Czechoslovak Republic] [1](#). He had a wife called Valerie, who was very well educated. She studied agriculture at Vienna University. Women couldn't officially study at university in those years, but she found some special way of doing so. She was the chairwoman of WIZO [Women's International Zionist Organization] in Mikulov. She was a Zionist and also a very charitable person.

My father's name was Bedrich Teltscher. He was born in Mikulov in 1896. He studied at Vienna Commercial Academy. My father was in the Austro-Hungarian army. He was a lieutenant, or something like that, and he kept a saber at home. I remember he always said that there was blood on it because he had killed a pig with it. He was a wine wholesaler. He ran the wine-shop, founded by my grandfather, with his brothers. They had huge cellars with many employees and also some offices. There were about ten people working for them, and they also employed many sales agents. Their property was taken away by the Germans after 1939. Today there's a wine-shop called Vinarstvi Mikulov in Mikulov, the basement of which stems from our former wine-shop.

My maternal grandfather's name was Gustav Abeles. I don't remember when he was born, but he came from Mikulov. He only had elementary education. He used to dress like anyone else, there was nothing special about his appearance. I think my grandfather had a shop where he sold soap and old clothes. That was before I was born. The shop didn't do very well. I remember that my grandfather worked as a bank clerk after I was born. My grandparents were also supported by my father. My grandfather had a beautiful garden; he loved flowers. I think he had someone to look after the garden, but I'm not sure about it because the garden wasn't next to their house. It was quite a big garden though, and he mainly grew flowers and also fruit; wine and fruit. There was a fig tree in his garden and we ate the figs, which is quite unusual in our country. My grandfather didn't have any animals because the garden was located in an urban part of Mikulov. He only had a dog, a Doberman called Cezar.

My grandmother came from a little village called Genzeldorf, or something like that, in Austria. [There is a village called Genzersdorf in Lower Austria.] Her name was Adela Abelesova, nee Drillova. I don't know when she was born. She certainly only had elementary education, which was usual in those times. She moved to Mikulov after the marriage with my grandfather. My grandmother was a pretty woman and very elegant. She didn't wear anything typically Jewish. She was a housewife and was very charitable. She worked as the president of the Organization of Jewish Women in Mikulov. They helped poor Jews: there were many of them in Mikulov, but nobody was hungry thanks to this organization. My grandmother had a non-Jewish woman to help her at home, who did the washing and the cleaning. She lived in the house of my grandparents' and some time later her mother and her sister came to Mikulov as well. They got a little house from my father. They could live there without paying anything. The housemaid's sister was a nun, but then she got tuberculosis and couldn't stay in the monastery any more.

My grandmother was a perfect cook. She often went on a holiday to Austria - usually she went alone because my grandfather wasn't very sociable. My grandmother, on the opposite, was outgoing and cheerful and traveled a lot. She had many relatives in Austria, especially in Vienna, so she usually visited some of them in Austria, but she also went to the spa in Karlovy Vary [2](#).

One of my grandmother's relatives I remember is her younger brother. I really loved him. His name was Willy Drill and he lived in Mauer bei Wien, which is part of Vienna today. He was a doctor and very nice. He usually didn't ask for any money when he visited and examined poor people; he always brought them something. He was so much liked that when Jews were deported, people didn't let him go and he could stay for another two years. However, finally he was deported, too. His wife wasn't Jewish, but she went with him, although she could have survived if she had stayed. They both died in a concentration camp. There's a street named after him in Mauer today.

My grandparents lived in a very old house in Emil Schweinburg Street. It was a Jewish street, it had been the so-called ghetto in the middle ages. After the reign of Joseph II [3](#) Jews were allowed to move out of the ghetto, but most of them stayed in that area. My grandparents lived in this street, too, but my parents didn't live there any more.

My grandparents lived in a two-storied house. An old lady stayed on the ground floor and my grandparents lived on the first floor. Their floor was divided into two parts - the front part and the back part. There was a living room, a bedroom, a kitchen, a pantry and a hall in the back part, and there were two other rooms in the front part. We slept in those rooms when we visited our grandparents. They had a stove, which they heated with coal. They had running water in the house, which was quite common. What was very special though was their bathroom. There was a bath tub in there and a bathroom stove, so if they lit the stove, they also had hot water. That was very unusual in those times.

They weren't kosher, but they observed some of the main Jewish traditions. They went to the synagogue on high holidays. And my grandmother also went there on Saturdays. They celebrated seder on Pesach. We were invited along with all the other Teltscher children. There were usually more than ten people. It was very nice. The whole family was sitting around the table. My grandfather conducted the seder, he read Jewish history [the Haggadah] and we ate bitter spices during some passages and drank wine. The children got wine with water. Then the youngest child asked the four questions in Hebrew [the mah nishtanah] - we learned that at school. There was a festive dinner. We ate some traditional food. I remember soup with gnocchi made from matzah flour, which I liked very much. Then, after dinner, there should traditionally be some more prayers and songs, but we didn't stick to that. We only had dinner. My grandparents also had a festive meal before Yom Kippur, but again, it was only dinner, they didn't observe any other laws.

My parents weren't very religious either but tradition was very important to them, as it is for many Jews. They went to the synagogue on high holidays. Another reason why they went there was because they were rich and used the opportunity to give some money to the poor, and for other purposes, after the service. Then they prayed for dead relatives. My father also lit candles for the dead at home. We fasted on Yom Kippur. And, we have always declared ourselves as Jews. But it was more out of tradition than religion. We didn't observe Sabbath. Jewish holidays weren't celebrated very much at home.

My favorite holiday was Simchat Torah. We went to the synagogue with small, blue and white flags. I also liked Purim because there was a Jewish ball, and I was allowed to go when I was 16. The money from the ball was used for charity. The ball was organized by WIZO and the Organization of Jewish Women, and it took place in a Jewish café. There was a big hall and all the important Jewish events, such as balls, lectures and theater performances took place there. We gave theatre performances on Purim as kids and that also happened in this café. My aunt Valerie, who was the chairwoman of WIZO in Mikulov, supervised us. WIZO also organised Chanukkah celebrations in cooperation with the Organization of Jewish Women. Every child got some refreshment and presents from the community. It was mainly organized for poor children, but we all got something because they didn't want the poor children to feel that they were poor. The community members were very close and always helped each other.

My mother's name was Hertha Teltscherova, nee Abelesova. She was born in 1899 in Mikulov. She only went to elementary school. There were no Czechs in Mikulov before World War I and both my parents went to a Jewish school, which had German as the main teaching language. They couldn't speak Czech well. My mother wanted to marry somebody else before my father, but her mother didn't like that man. Then Mr. Bedrich Teltscher came; he was rich and my grandmother liked him. It wasn't an arranged marriage, though. My mother was a beautiful woman, so my father had every good reason to marry her. However, I do think that the fact that he was rich played a part in my mother's decision. They had their wedding in a synagogue in 1920. I'm sure they went on a honeymoon, but don't ask me where. My mother was a housewife when we lived in Mikulov.

## Growing up

I was born on 18th November 1921 and my sister Kitty Peterson, nee Teltscherova, followed in 1924. We were both born in Vienna because it was the nearest bigger city. We were raised bilingually, but our mother tongue is German. We spoke German with our parents at home, but I spoke Czech with my sister.

We were raised in an old patrician house, which was very beautiful and overgrown with Virginia creeper. There were two floors. We had a cellar on the ground floor and there was also an apartment there, where one of my father's employees lived. Then there were six rooms on the first floor, a big hall, a terrace and a beautiful garden. There was an old sycamore and gingko and then two Mediterranean trees with lovely blue blossoms in the garden. I really loved the house. The Gestapo established their headquarters there after we left during World War II. And they left the garden as it was. But then the STB [Statni Tajna Bezpecnost] [4](#) came and they destroyed the garden as well as the Virginia creeper. They cut down the trees and painted the house in an ugly yellow color. They only left the sycamore, and that's why the street is called Pod Platanem [Under the Sycamore].

We had a cook, a servant and a Fraulein [governess]. Her name was Ada. They lived in our house, which was usual in those times. The servant and the cook weren't Jewish, but the Fraulein was. The cook did the bigger part of the shopping, but my mother also did some. We never had a kosher kitchen. I remember a story regarding that. When I started to go to school, we used to have religious classes. We were taught by the rabbi and he said that Jews had to eat kosher. The children didn't know what that meant, so he explained that, for example, we weren't allowed to eat ham. When I came home that day, we had ham for dinner. And I told my mother, 'Mum, we aren't allowed to eat ham. The rabbi said that Jews aren't allowed to eat ham'. And my mother answered that it was beef ham, and that we therefore had no problem eating it. I believed her for some time. My mum only used to cook on special occasions, but she always made delicious desserts when we had guests. She also made beautiful hand-made sweaters and leather gloves.

When we were young, we liked the Fraulein. She came from a Czech family living in Vienna. She spoke perfect Czech as well as German. We spoke Czech with her because our parents only spoke a little Czech and wanted us to practice. Ada had a few sisters and two brothers and we sometimes went to Vienna with her to visit them. One of her sisters was a dressmaker and made clothes for us. The Fraulein was a very dominant person, I think that our mother was a little afraid of her. When we were older, we were angry with her because we didn't like to have someone looking after

us all the time. Ada spent many years with us. After the Germans arrived she went to my parents' friends in England to work as a servant for them. Then her sister came to us for help and my parents helped her to emigrate to America. Our Fraulein also went to America later and they worked there as servant and cook for someone. They were in touch with my parents after they left for the USA.

Mikulov had a population of 8,000 people when I was a child. There were about 1,000 Jews. It's the oldest Jewish town, after Prague, and has a very nice old cemetery. Rabbi Low [Judah ben Bezalel Low] [5](#) was there before he went to Prague. There used to be a number of synagogues back in the 19th century, but there was only one left when I lived in Mikulov. There was a special section for women - it was a balcony. There was also a small synagogue for winter service. There had only been one Jewish school in Mikulov during the Austro-Hungarian times [the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy]. But one of the schools was in the Jewish street. It was a state school. It was still called the Jewish school, although it was a German one. There were two other German schools in Mikulov and only one Czech school, when I was a child. I didn't go to the Jewish school, because we didn't live in the Jewish street, but most of the other Jewish children did.

The Jewish community in Mikulov was conservative. There were really religious people such as the cantor and the rabbi, but they weren't Orthodox. There were various Jewish organizations in Mikulov: Maccabi [6](#) for adults, Maccabi Hatzairot for children, WIZO and the Organization of Jewish Women. There was a very famous Jewish museum in Mikulov and many beautiful exhibitions in the Jewish museum of Prague originally come from this museum. The museum was founded by my uncle Richard, the one who was a member of the Jewish Party. As far as I remember, there was no mikveh when I was a girl, but there was a kosher butcher shop. I don't remember any other Jewish institutions. The Jews in Mikulov usually owned shops, mostly in the Jewish street. And there were also Jewish lawyers and two doctors; that was a kind of Jewish intelligentsia. Life was pretty quiet in Mikulov during my childhood. I remember the celebrations on 7th March, the birthday of President Masaryk [7](#). The few Czechs and the Jews got together. I remember that there was also a special service in the synagogue on that day, although I can't recall any details.

My sister only went to Czech schools. I went to a German elementary school in Mikulov and then to a German grammar school for four years. There were only three or four Jews out of thirty-five children in our class. The non-Jewish children made stupid remarks about Jews; they probably heard it at home. And, they weren't ashamed at all. Some teachers were anti-Semitic, too. So I decided to change school and went to a Czech grammar school in Breclav. I finished my 5th and 6th year in Breclav.

I mostly made friends with Jews at school as well as outside school. I had one or two non-Jewish friends, but I felt better among Jews. I think our parents didn't care whether our friends were Jewish or not. There were two groups of Jewish children - the first one consisted of less wealthy children and then there was a group of younger children, who went to Czech schools and had a lot of non-Jewish friends. I met more children from the first group and my sister more from the second group. My parents would have preferred to see me socialize with the second one, too, but in those years I was very left-wing, and I was ashamed of my rich family a little. We were playing just like other kids. I was a member of the Maccabi Hatsairot. We met at least once a week. All the children who lived in the Jewish street were there. We were interested in Jewish history and the history of Zionism, we sang Jewish songs and went for trips.

I read a lot. I didn't have any favorite writer, but when I was sixteen, I knew a lot of literature, not only the modern writers. I also read the classics because we had them at home. I knew French literature as well. I read philosophy - I probably didn't understand it, but still, I read Spinoza [8](#) and Nietzsche [9](#). I read them in German. Nietzsche has to be read in German because he uses such a poetic language. I also read in French and in Czech. When I went to school to Breclav, I got money for lunch from my parents, but I bought books instead of food.

My parents didn't let me go on holiday with my friends; my sister and me usually had to go to Switzerland to learn French. We went there three times and always spent a month there. I was also on a summer course at the University of Neuchatel once - it was fun because there were people aged around 18 and I was only 14 then. My parents usually went on holiday to Austria, mostly to Vienna, to visit relatives. My father often went to the spa because he had rheumatism; sometimes he couldn't even get out of bed. He went to Piestany [spa town in Slovakia] and to Badgastein [spa town] in Austria. I remember that we were also on vacation in Italy with my parents once, and we often went to Vienna with my parents by car. They didn't have a car of their own for quite a long time, but we usually hired one with a chauffeur. And then we had cars in the wine-shop. My parents got their driving license when we were a little older. My mum was good at driving; she drove later when they lived in America [after World War II] as well, but my father was clumsy.

I was good at sports. I loved skiing. I usually went to the Austrian Alps with my mother's relatives. It was the family of my mother's cousin and they had a son, who was really good at skiing because they learned skiing at school. I skied with him every year. I swam and went cycling in the summer. I usually went to the lakes on bicycle with my friends.

## During the war

After 1938, when the Germans occupied Sudetenland [10](#), we left Mikulov and went to Brno. My parents weren't allowed to work in Brno [because of the anti-Jewish laws in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia] [11](#), but we had brought some money from Mikulov. At first we rented an apartment there. Soon we got a notice to leave because they didn't want to have a Jewish family there, although the owner of the apartment was Czech. Uncle Ervin's wife had her own apartment in Brno, so I lived there with my grandparents. My sister lived in Uncle Ervin's apartment with his family. Uncle Robert's family moved to Brno from Vienna when Hitler came to Vienna [after the Anschluss] [12](#) because they had Czech citizenship. My parents stayed with them.

My sister went to commercial academy in Brno. I finished grammar school in Brno. It was a Jewish grammar school with Czech as teaching language. There were Jewish teachers who couldn't teach anywhere else. They were great. Our teacher of history and philosophy was the only Jewish associate professor at Brno University. We also had an excellent teacher of biology, who made me interested in the subject very much. I was a member of Techelet lavan [leftist Zionist organization] in Brno. It was a Jewish youth organization, a Zionist movement. It was founded by young people who wanted to go to the kibbutz and were also influenced by a German movement called Wandervogel [founded in 1895]. Wandervogel was a youth movement, a somewhat left-wing and very romantic movement. People went on trips together, had their own songs and read romantic literature. It was founded in Germany and also existed in Austria and here [in the Czech lands]. Originally, Techelet lavan was called Blau-Weiss [German for Blue-and-White]. It was like a Jewish

Wandervogel.

I became a member after I arrived in Brno. I met people from Techelet Iavan at school and I was also left-wing, so I was happy to have the possibility to become a member of such an organization. We made trips, studied the history of the Zionist movement, but also the ideas of socialism and Marxism. We also read literature. It was a kind of intellectual movement. We were interested in philosophy and literature and also in music: we sang beautiful songs. It was absurd, I didn't understand it in those times, but then, during the war, I realized that we were concerned about Chinese literature and didn't realize at all that meanwhile the world was being destroyed.

I know about some of my classmates who survived the war. One of them was a boy, who came from Presov. After the school was closed by the Germans, he returned to Presov, somehow got Aryan documents and survived. Another one of my classmates, my good friend originally came from Poland. Then, in October 1939 he did not come to school. We realized that he, just like all Polish people [Polish Jews] were sent to concentration camps in Poland. But then I met him in 1940 on the boat to Palestine. It was such a surprise. He had a younger brother who had come to Palestine before him. They had some relatives there, so they helped him. They also sent visa for my friend to the concentration camp. You know, it was just at the beginning of it all, it was not so strict then, and if someone got a visa, they let him go. So we met on the boat. He studied archeology in Palestine and became a professor of archeology at Hebrew University.

My friend Helga was deported to Terezin with her mother. They stayed there throughout the war. Her mother worked there as a nurse and got typhoid and finally died of it. Helga was also ill, but she survived. After the war she went to Libya to her sister and brother-in-law. Then she went to London and finally to America, where she became a painter. She died in 2003.

Uncle Richard and Aunt Valerie knew they had to leave Bohemia very quickly after 1939 because of their Zionist activities, so they went to Poland and then succeeded in emigrating to England. So did my uncles Felix and Jan. They spent the rest of their lives there. Uncle Evzen was killed during World War II. Uncle Robert emigrated to Palestine with his wife. Oskar was killed, probably in a concentration camp, but I don't know any details. My grandparents were deported from Brno to Terezin [13](#) and died in Treblinka. I got that information from the Prague Jewish community, which has records of people who were in Terezin.

My father was called to the emigration office in 1940 and told to leave the Protectorate [Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia] [14](#) and the Reich within one week. I don't know why this happened, but it certainly saved our lives. I was talking with my father about it later, and he said he also didn't know why. My father was a very charitable man, and I think that sometime he had probably helped someone, who later got a special position with the Germans and then helped us in return.

I had problems regarding that later, in the communist times, because they told me that my father had to be a confidant. If nothing else, I knew for sure that my father wasn't a confidant! It wasn't easy to leave the Protectorate after the beginning of World War II. It was impossible to get a visa to any of the allied states if you were in the German area. There was only one place in the world where it was possible to go with a J- passport [15](#) - Shanghai. All you needed was some money. I don't know, there may have been organized transports to Shanghai, but my parents went individually. We got the money from my father's brothers who had already gone to England. We

took a train to Opatija, Italy, and waited there for the boat to Shanghai, which only went once a month. So we were there for nearly a month. During that time I was very lucky because I received a student certificate to study in Palestine - I got it from my uncle Richard, who got it in England for me. He sent it to Italy by post. So I had the opportunity to study in Palestine, which was better than going to the ghetto in Shanghai. Palestine was a British mandate and I couldn't go there with the J-passport. However, somebody told us that there was an old German consul in Fiume, who was very kind and gave passports without a 'J' to Jews. I went there with my father. We told him that I had crossed the border illegally to Yugoslavia and then to Italy and he really gave me the new passport. I went to Jerusalem to study biology, and my parents went to Shanghai with my sister.

I don't know much about my parents' life in Shanghai because we weren't in touch for a long time. I know they didn't have an easy life there. My mother had to do everything on her own. They opened a shop with another Jewish woman. My mum baked cookies for the shop at home. The living conditions were very hard; there was no running water for example.

My studies in Palestine were an interesting experience. I got the certificate and everyone with the certificate got a scholarship for two years. It wasn't much but it helped. There were many Czechs with the certificate. Some of them were married, had left their wives at home and wanted to get them over to Palestine as well, so they renounced the scholarship and bought the certificate for them. I know that it worked in one or two cases. But still we had to work. I had to pay for the room I rented and I had to eat something. We were doing the cleaning at Jerusalem University, but there were too many applicants, so everyone only got the job for three months. I also cleaned in houses. At first I thought I could teach languages or something like that, but there were too many educated people. There were many doctors, who were selling eggs instead of working in their profession.

I always rented a room with someone else because it was cheaper that way. I found Eva Weidova through an advertisement and we lived together for some time. She came from Slovakia. She was very kind. She was rather domestic, she cooked very well. She also came to Jerusalem to study, but then she found a boyfriend and probably got married. I don't know, what happened to her later.

I became a member of the Communist Party in Palestine. The party was illegal, so it was impossible to tell anyone, 'I'm a member, come and join us'. They just talked with you about social things etc. but they couldn't say they were in the Party because it was dangerous; you could have gone to prison or even be expelled. It was no fun. They were always telling me, 'Talk quietly, why are you shouting?' I answered, 'I come from a democratic country, everyone can say what he thinks there, I'm going to say whatever I want and as loud as I want!' I didn't realize the danger.

They took me to the poor parts of the city - it's hard to describe, I mean, it's unimaginable how people were surviving under such bad conditions. There were 12 people living in one room without windows. I couldn't sleep for a week after that visit. So I entered the Party because I wanted to help all those people, and I believed in all their ideas. At first there was one party for both, Jews and Arabs. But we didn't meet the Arabs at all. Maybe the leaders met them but normal members didn't. Then there were some problems, because it was found that one of the leaders was an English confidant... Then the Arab party was separated from the Jewish one. I don't know much about it, I wasn't very active. I was only active among students - we were teaching illiterate children but didn't have any political ambitions. We taught the children every day in the afternoon, because they usually worked in the morning. So they came after work, we gave them something to



eat - some bread and tea we got from the organization - and taught them something. It probably wasn't teaching on the highest level. We were only students, and everyone taught something about his subject at university. We taught them some basic things, such as how to read and write, and I told them about nature, which I liked.

## Post-war

My sister worked as a secretary in Shanghai. She met her future husband there after the war - he was a member of the merchant navy - and went to America with him. My parents went to America soon after. They had an opportunity to go back to Czechoslovakia, but they finally decided to go to the USA. And I'm really happy about that because it was a hard life here during the communist times. My sister first worked as a secretary in America. Then she had a daughter, Janice, and stayed at home with her. She lives in a village near San Francisco now. My parents lived in San Francisco. My mum was very flexible again: she worked in a spice factory called Spice Island. She was very hard-working, but then she became ill. She died of cancer in 1969. It was difficult for my father to find a job in America. He wasn't as flexible as my mother. Besides he wasn't young any more and there weren't many possibilities of work for people of his age. He helped out in shops, particularly after Christmas, when people came to shops to exchange unwanted presents. It was funny in a way that he did that kind of work because he used to be such a great tradesman. My father died in 1978. Both my parents are buried in the Jewish part of a cemetery in San Francisco. And, my father had a tombstone made with the names of our relatives who were killed during the war.

My parents got some 'Wiedergutmachung', reparation, because my grandfather had owned some properties in Austria. The reparation payments in America started much earlier than here. They got a certain amount every month, so they had something like a pension.

I returned to Prague in 1946. I didn't want to stay in Palestine because I felt my home was here, in the Czech Republic, and I had enough of emigrating. I didn't want to go to America and I especially didn't want to go to Mikulov because it was a cemetery for me: only four Jews returned there after the war. Some of them had emigrated before the war, that's true, part of the young people went to Palestine and some of them were in England, but they were only a few left anyway. Our lives were saved by emigrating because nobody else from our relatives in Mikulov or in Austria, apart from my father's two brothers, who had left for England, survived.

I returned to Prague by boat. It was a very adventurous journey. We went to France first since the immigration offices were there. The journey took very long because the boat was half broken, it was from South America. There were cabins but we stayed on the deck, which was cheaper. There were about five or six young people - mostly from Austria - and we shared our food. We went through Egypt, then to Greece and then to Marseille. The journey should have taken five days, but finally we were going for more than a week. After we left Egypt, the boat had some problems; there was soot everywhere, we were very dirty. There were showers on the lower deck, but there wasn't enough water, so after a few days they didn't want to let us take a shower. It was horrible. The most terrible thing was that we didn't have enough food. We had some Palestinian money... they sold bread but the further we got from Palestine, the higher was the price. So we were very hungry. There were some French actors on the boat, they lived in cabins and also had food. I remember as

we were watching them eat and felt really sick from hunger. Finally we got to Marseille. We had some family friends there, so I stayed with them for a few days, they gave me food and some money and then I took the train to Prague.

I finished my PhD after I went to Prague. It was quite a formal thing because the studies in Palestine were much more difficult than the ones here. I started to work as a researcher in the Research Institute for Plant- Growing. I worked there until the 1960s, then I went to the Institute for Experimental Botany.

I met my husband at work - we were working in the same institute. My husband's name was Slavomil Hejny. He was born in 1921 in Vysocina. He spent his childhood in Protivin. Then he moved to Prague, where he studied and worked at the university. Later he worked as a director of the Institute of Botany in Pruhonice [a suburb of Prague]. He had the same education as I. He wasn't Jewish. I had always told everyone that I'm a Jew, and I said it to my future husband as well. And I told him that he could have problems because of it. But he got very angry and told me that he wanted to marry me no matter what. My family didn't mind that he wasn't Jewish. My sister's husband wasn't Jewish either. We got married at the local council in Prague.

We had two sons. Petr was born in 1952 and Michal in 1955. I didn't raise my sons as Jews; it was impossible. Everybody knew that I had been to Palestine. I was always considered a Zionist and had many problems. So, I was a Jew, my husband was an atheist, but it was no topic for us. Once, however, Michal came home crying and told me that children didn't want to play with him because his mother was a Jew. So I told them everything, and among other things, I told them that Einstein was a Jew. This became a famous sentence in our family: Einstein was a Jew. I always worried that my children might suffer because of me. I was considered a Zionist just because I had been to Palestine, and to be a Zionist was worse than to be an imperialist. There were no particular reasons, but the communists were trying to get rid of everything that was a little different from their way of thinking. I wasn't a Zionist, otherwise I wouldn't have come back. However, I knew it was nothing to be ashamed of because I knew what it meant to be a Zionist. I was happy after the establishment of the State of Israel, although I wasn't a Zionist. I have to say after all that happened here, I was sorry I didn't stay there.

I had been a member of the Communist Party in Palestine, and there were only idealists. Everyone believed that the possibilities should be the same for everybody. So I came back home and joined the Party here as well. I found the conditions strange, but I was thinking that every beginning was a hard one. I believed in it until 1952, until the 'Slanskiada' [Slansky trial] [16](#). It was my first court case. They accused me of co-operation with Slansky. They wanted to throw me out of the Party. They said I was a Zionist. They said I was a spy. I remember I couldn't sleep at night because I was thinking about what I could possibly do. I had to do something, when everyone said I was a spy. I didn't understand the system. Then I found out that it wasn't only me, but all Jews, even the laborers. And then I began to understand. I couldn't leave the Party though. Well, I could have, but I was afraid. I already had my son Petr, and we lived in an apartment owned by the Research Institute. Leaving the Party would have meant the end of everything. So I stayed in the Party but I didn't believe anything anymore. Then they threw me out in 1969 because of the political change after 1968, and I was happy.

It was a strange feeling: I didn't feel guilty at all for being in the Party, I didn't do anything bad, I didn't have any advantages. It was exactly the opposite, but I had always problems there. Then I had to do the candidacy [candidate of science] for my work. I needed a recommendation from the Party and they didn't give it to me. They said it was because I didn't come to the meetings. But that wasn't true. However, I had some friends at university. I worked there as a lecturer and they liked me. They helped me somehow, so I passed the exams although I didn't have the recommendation.

I wasn't able to communicate with my family in America after the war. It was dangerous. I would have risked losing my job, which I couldn't afford. But I had an aunt here; she was married to one of my father's brothers. She was a good friend of my mother, even after they divorced. She had also been in Shanghai during World War II. She came back and lived in Miroslav in South Moravia. My parents sent her letters for me, she sent the letters to me and my answers back to my parents. My parents came to Prague for the first time in 1964. It was also the first time I saw them after the war. I worked at the Academy of Sciences then and there was a very sensitive personnel officer there. I could tell him that my parents lived in America, and I could also send them letters directly. I also went to America to visit them. My mother was ill; she had breast cancer. She had an operation in 1963. She was all right for a while, but the tumor returned after two years. I was allowed to visit her in America without bigger problems then. I was also sent to America to the International Botany Congress in Seattle. That was in 1969.

I got divorced after the political changes in 1969 [17](#). My husband didn't want to stay with me any more because of his career. He became a Doctor of Science and a member of the Academy of Sciences. He died in Prague in 2001.

I had to leave the Institute for Experimental Botany in 1977 for political reasons - they accused me of being a Zionist spy. There's no written record about that, but it's clear why it happened. I was a Jew and Jews had to leave their positions. Besides I had been to Palestine, which automatically meant that I was a Zionist, an imperialist, and had no rights. Each institution, research institute, ministry and other similar organization were given quotas of how many people they had to fire. And Jews had to leave first. So they threw me out.

I worked as a laborer in a factory: I manufactured pills in Leciva [pharmaceutical factory] and I was really upset because I had done bio-chemistry before and saw all the mistakes they made. I worked there for a year. Then I went to Svoboda Printing Works because I didn't understand the subject there. I worked in a bindery for about a year. There were very nice people there. In 1978 I started to work for PIS [Prague Information Office] [18](#). Legally, I was only allowed to do the manual work. But if you worked somewhere on a special agreement, your employer didn't have to let outsiders know about you doing another job. I worked there as an interpreter for people from the Third World. Later the regulations were changed and I couldn't work there anymore. I found a job in an insurance company in 1980. I worked there as a foreign correspondent. In 1983 I started to teach German. Then I met a philologist and she offered me to do translations for Artia Publishing House. I started to work for them in 1985. I was really afraid that somebody could recognize me. But I was lucky and always met nice people.

I became a member of the Prague Jewish community after I returned from Palestine and gradually I became more active. Once I needed a book for my translation, and I knew I could get it at the Jewish community. So I went to the library and the librarian was very nice and helped me. I told

him if he needed any help I would help him. And he answered that he personally didn't need anything, but he told me about the organization Komise zen [Council of Women]. They regularly go to elderly people to congratulate them on their birthdays. I joined that organization - I think that was in the 1970s. I became more active in the Jewish community after I was thrown out of the Party. After WIZO was founded in 1990, I became a member of this organization as well, and I started to help out in the social department of the Jewish community.

After they threw me out of the Party in 1969, I was trying to listen to Radio Free Europe, but it was difficult. We lived in Ruzyne [part of Prague where the airport is located]. We could only listen to it in the cottage. I listened to Radio Vienna a lot and to Voice of America a little, but Radio Free Europe had a very bad signal. I also got some Samizdat journals and books - usually some of my friends gave them to me.

My life didn't change much after my divorce. I was always proud to be a Jew. I probably started to meet my Jewish friends more often because I didn't have to respect my husband and his friends anymore. In general, I and my husband more or less shared the same political opinions. Before 1969 it was easier, but afterwards... He was weak. I couldn't make any compromises. Actually, neither could he, but he got himself to believe the things they said. And then it became impossible to have a real discussion with him. So we got divorced.

My son Petr has spent all his life in Prague. He worked as a proofreader with Albatros Publishing House, and then he became an editor. Now he works as a freelance translator and he's also an editor with Slovart Publishing House. He is married. His wife comes from South Bohemia, she has nothing to do with Judaism, but I would say that she is the best Jew in our family; she's really interested in it. They have a daughter, Jana, and she is also very interested in everything Jewish. I always go to the Spanish synagogue [19](#) with her. It's very nice to see the continuity of traditions.

Michal emigrated to America when he was 20. He studied at the conservatory and in DAMU [Academy of Drama] in Prague, and then he studied psychology in America. He was an actor. He later became a writer there. He did different things for a living; he just wanted to write. He also co-operated with some people here and translated a musical, which was on show in Prague. Michal died in America in 1992.

My life hasn't changed much after the Revolution in 1989 [the so-called Velvet Revolution] [20](#). Of course I was very happy and I hope that future generations won't have to live through what we had to. But there are many problems now as well, for example ecological problems. There weren't many changes for me personally, and I'm too old now. However, Jewish life in Prague has become more intense and I have joined in - I still do some social work. I go to visit people who need some help. I didn't want to have any official functions. I find this kind of social work very important. I'm still a member of the Council of Women and of WIZO. I go to the synagogue on high holidays and I light candles for the dead. I don't live kosher. Religion doesn't mean much to me; these things are more family tradition than religion for me. I've already been to Israel three times since 1990. There wasn't any possibility to go there before. I was only there for a couple of weeks each time. I have many friends there and they also come to visit me in the Czech Republic. I still teach German in two companies and I translate.

## Glossary

## **1 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.

## **2 Karlovy Vary (German name**

Karlsbad): The most famous Bohemian spa, named after Bohemian King Charles (Karl) IV, who allegedly found the springs during a hunting expedition in 1358. It was one of the most popular resorts among the royalty and aristocracy in Europe for centuries.

## **3 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.

## **4 Statni Tajna Bezpecnost**

Czech intelligence and security service founded in 1948.

## **5 Low, Judah ben Bezalel (1520s-1609)**

Austrian Talmudist, mathematician and rabbi. From 1553 to 1573 Low was Moravian ‚Landesrabbiner‘ at Nikolsburg (today Mikulov, Czech Republic), and as such he directed the affairs of the community, as well as the study of the Talmud. The Moravian communities considered him

an authority, even long after he had given up his office. Low founded and, for some time, conducted the 'Klaus', a Talmud school, in Prague. Low was chosen chief rabbi of Poland in Posen at the end of the 1580s, and he became chief rabbi of Prague at the end of the 1590s.

## **6 Maccabi World Union**

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

## **7 Masaryk, Thomas 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 Eduard Benes, his former foreign minister, succeeded him.

## **8 Spinoza, Baruch (1632-1677)**

Dutch philosopher of Portuguese-Jewish origin. An independent thinker, he declined offers of academic posts and pursued his individual philosophical inquiry instead. He read the mathematical and philosophical works of Descartes but unlike Descartes did not see a separation between God, mind and matter. Ethics, considered Spinoza's major work, was published in 1677.

## **9 Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844-1900)**

German philosopher and poet. Long misunderstood and even reviled as a result of misuses of his work, most notably by the Nazis, Nietzsche has become one of the most influential philosophers of the late 20th century. Nietzsche is famous, among others, for the theory of the Übermensch, which he developed in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. In 1889 he suffered a mental breakdown from which he never recovered.

## **10 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.

### **11 Anti-Jewish laws in the Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia**

After the Germans occupied Bohemia and Moravia, anti-Jewish legislation was gradually introduced. Jews were not allowed to enter public places, such as parks, theatres, cinemas, libraries, swimming pools, etc. They were excluded from all kinds of professional associations and could not be civil servants. They were not allowed to attend German or Czech schools, and later private lessons were forbidden, too. They were not allowed to leave their houses after 8pm. Their shopping hours were limited to 3 to 5pm. They were only allowed to travel in special sections of public transportation. They had their telephones and radios confiscated. They were not allowed to change their place of residence without permission. In 1941 they were ordered to wear the yellow badge.

### **12 Anschluss**

The annexation of Austria to Germany. The 1919 peace treaty of St. Germain prohibited the Anschluss, to prevent a resurgence of a strong Germany. On 12th March 1938 Hitler occupied Austria, and, to popular approval, annexed it as the province of Ostmark. In April 1945 Austria regained independence legalizing it with the Austrian State Treaty in 1955.

### **13 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.

### **14 Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia**

Bohemia and Moravia were occupied by the Germans and transformed into a German Protectorate in March 1939, after Slovakia declared its independence. The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was placed under the supervision of the Reich protector, Konstantin von Neurath. The Gestapo assumed police authority. Jews were dismissed from civil service and placed in an extralegal position. In the fall of 1941, the Reich adopted a more radical policy in the Protectorate. The

Gestapo became very active in arrests and executions. The deportation of Jews to concentration camps was organized, and Terezin/Theresienstadt was turned into a ghetto for Jewish families. During the existence of the Protectorate the Jewish population of Bohemia and Moravia was virtually annihilated. After World War II the pre-1938 boundaries were restored, and most of the German-speaking population was expelled.

### **15 J-passport**

Special passport given to Jews during World War II. The red letter 'J' was written into it and every man had Israel, every woman had Sara added to their name.

### **16 Slansky Trial**

Communist show trial named after its most prominent victim, Rudolf Slansky. It was the most spectacular among show trials against communists with a wartime connection with the West, veterans of the Spanish Civil War, Jews, and Slovak 'bourgeois nationalists'. In November 1952 Slansky and 13 other prominent communist personalities, 11 of whom were Jewish, including Slansky, were brought to trial. The trial was given great publicity; they were accused of being Trotskyist, Titoist, Zionist, bourgeois, nationalist traitors, and in the service of American imperialism. Slansky was executed, and many others were sentenced to death or to forced labor in prison camps.

### **17 Political changes in 1969**

Following the Prague Spring of 1968, which was suppressed by armies of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, a program of 'normalization' was initiated. Normalization meant the restoration of continuity with the pre-reform period and it entailed thoroughgoing political repression and the return to ideological conformity. Top levels of government, the leadership of social organizations and the party organization were purged of all reformist elements. Publishing houses and film studios were placed under new direction. Censorship was strictly imposed, and a campaign of militant atheism was organized. A new government was set up at the beginning of 1970, and, later that year, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, which incorporated the principle of limited sovereignty. Soviet troops remained stationed in Czechoslovakia and Soviet advisers supervised the functioning of the Ministry of Interior and the security apparatus.

### **18 Prague Information Service (PIS)**

The organization was founded in 1957 as an independent cultural and educational office with the goal of informing Prague citizens as well as native and foreign visitors about the economic, social, political and cultural development and life of Prague. PIS has been organizing guide service in Prague and in other regions as well as activities of regional groups relating to national history and geography.

### **19 Spanish Synagogue**

This famous Prague synagogue was built in 1868 on the site of the oldest Jewish prayer house in



what was the Jewish ghetto then. It was designed in Moorish style. The interior decoration features a low stucco arabesque of stylized Islamic motifs. The interior, along with the stained glass windows, was completed in 1893. It served as a house of worship for an increasing number of Reform Jews. After being closed for over 20 years, the synagogue was reopened in 1998.

## **20 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. The Velvet Revolution started with student demonstrations, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the student demonstration against the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. Brutal police intervention stirred up public unrest, mass demonstrations took place in Prague, Bratislava and other towns, and a general strike began on 27th November. The Civic Forum demanded the resignation of the communist government. Due to the general strike Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec was finally forced to hold talks with the Civic Forum and agreed to form a new coalition government. On 29th December democratic elections were held, and Vaclav Havel was elected President of Czechoslovakia.