

# Viera Slesingerova

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Prague

Czech Republic

Interviewer: Pavla Neuner

Date of interview: January 2004

I met with Mrs. Slesingerova in her cozy apartment overlooking the Vltava River. The house in which she lives is located directly on the embankment in the historic quarter of the city and is surrounded by many historic buildings, such as the famous Convent of St. Agnes. Mrs. Slesingerova comes across as a dignified and educated lady. The interview was carried out in a very pleasant atmosphere.

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## Family background

My paternal grandfather was called Ignac Pollak and my maternal grandmother was called Julie Pollakova, nee Steinerova. I don't know when and where they were born, but I do know that they lived in Klatovy, where my grandfather owned a house with a wholesale coal and liquor store. My grandfather was a great Czech patriot and Sokol <sup>1</sup> member,member; hence they spoke Czech at their house. As to how religious he was, my grandfather was a traditional Czech assimilated Jew. I never knew him, because he died before I was born, when he was in his seventies. He is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Klatovy, where he was the first to get a tombstone with an inscription in Czech. I know nothing about my maternal grandmother, as she died when she was young, when my dad was about eighteen.

My grandfather on my mother's side was called Bernat Paszternak. He evidently had a religious education and he lived with my grandmother in Kosice, where he was a shammash. He was a very nice person, tall with gray hair. They always spoke Hungarian in my mom's family, so I used to call my grandfather 'aranyszoke' [Hungarian for 'golden-haired'] granddad. I was very fond of him. My grandmother was called Berta Paszternakova, nee Schon and was a Hungarian Jew. Both grandparents were very religious. They kept a kosher household and my grandmother wore a wig, but they were tolerant towards my parents. Although the food was not kosher in our house, they still ate it and slept over whenever they came for a visit. After getting married, my dad had kidney failure once and the doctor said that my mom would have to cut out all kosher food, unless she wanted to kill him. My devout grandparents accepted this. I remember the Friday evenings that they spent at our place. My grandfather would always bless me, before going to the synagogue. My granddad was apparently very strict as a father, but he was very kind to me. My mom always said

that my grandmother was so good-natured that she could never bring herself to give her children a smack, even when they were being unbearably naughty. My grandmother died of cancer in 1936 and my grandfather died about three months later. My grandmother was over seventy, my grandfather over eighty. They both had a Jewish burial.

My dad was called Otto Pollak and he was born in 1884 in Klatovy. He studied law, but didn't become a lawyer. After World War I he worked as a state official in Slovakia. [Editor's note: After World War I, when the Czechoslovak state was founded Czech bureaucrats were sent to the previously Hungarian Slovakia to replace the Hungarian state officials.] He was head of the revenue office and as such was constantly being transferred from place to place, so we often moved house. During World War I, my dad was enlisted in the Austro-Hungarian army [KuK Army] [2](#). He never talked about this much, but I know that he was on the Italian Front [3](#) for a while. He probably had a commission, because he was given his own orderly. My dad went to the synagogue on the high holidays, but he wasn't devout. His mother tongue was Czech and he came from a large assimilated Czech Jewish family, so my grandfather was not too happy when my dad fell in love with my mum, a poor Hungarian Jewess.

My dad was a person of few words, as I am. My husband used to say to me that our daughter says more in a day than I do in a year. And my dad spoke even less. One of my aunts always used to say to my mom, 'Are there any pliers here?' 'What for?' 'To get a word out of him!' My dad was a very proper, strict man. It was as if he had been born a state official. When we lived in Zilina, our apartment was in the very house where my dad's office was. From time to time I would go to see him in his office. He had a long desk there on which I liked to play ping pong. One day I rushed in and saw a man there who was trying to persuade my dad to join the Agrarian Party. That was the strongest party at the time, but my dad couldn't get politically involved in any major way, as he was a state official, so he was never in any party. He was an honest and incorruptible official. I heard that he was offered bribes to do things, but he always turned such things down as being completely out of the question.

My dad was strict with me at home, but after his death I came to realize how little one can ever know about other people. I know that he was very fond of me, I was everything to him and he would do anything for me, but he was never able to show it like mom did. My dad didn't cuddle me as much as mom did, but he liked it when I came up to him and sat in his lap. He had all kinds of hobbies. I remember that he enjoyed dancing and, later on, he played bridge and liked to go fishing, especially for trout. When he was into dancing, I apparently used to get a chair ready so that he could try out his dance steps when he came home from the office. Photography was another one of his great hobbies.

My mom was called Helena Pollakova, nee Paszternak. She was born in 1896 in a small village near Kosice called Buzita [Buzita is the Hungarian name of the village, officially today the Slovak version 'Buzica' is used.]. She had a secondary school education, probably with a focus on commerce. My mom was a nice, pretty woman. In her youth she had one great love, which was called Arpad. He came from a Jewish family, which was probably wealthier than my mom's, because his parents weren't in favor of their relationship, even though it was a great love. Arpad had to promise his father on his death bed that he wouldn't marry her, so they had to break up. My mom spoke about him from time to time and used to say that the nicest thing about their relationship was that it would never end, because it had never been fulfilled. We met Arpad once in Marianske Lazne [4](#). My

mom always used to say that he was very unhappy, because he had no children with the woman he had married.

My parents met in Kosice. They spoke German together, for dad didn't speak Hungarian and mom didn't speak Czech or Slovak. My dad must have been very much in love, because his father also came out against their relationship. When my parents were to get married, my dad sent his father a letter which made clear his intentions, and attached to it a photo of mom. My mom was a beautiful woman, but not at all photogenic. He got a letter back complaining that not only was she Hungarian, but that she was also from a very religious family and that she was so ugly that he would disinherit him if they ever got married. So their love for each other must have been great. Afterwards, it occurred to dad that mom could try writing to my grandfather, because she knew how to write well. In response to this letter, my grandfather wrote that he couldn't come to the wedding himself but that he was sending dad's brother Pavel. It was a Jewish wedding. Shortly afterwards, mom was then invited to Klatovy and when she came, there was a great reception. When they were walking along the street, my grandfather said to her, 'Helena, either you will speak Czech or you will be quiet.' Later on, mom actually learnt to speak Czech very well. She made spelling mistakes, but spoke with such a good accent that she was considered to be Czech.

My mom was a housewife. She did the shopping and cooking, as dad came home for lunch. She always had a maid to help her out. In the afternoons she would knit, crochet and make covers, which she enjoyed doing. She also enjoyed having company, visiting friends and going to cafes with dad. My parents longed to have a child, but it was four years into the marriage before I was born. My mom had been going to Frantiskovy Lazne [spa in western Bohemia founded in 1793, famous for curing women diseases], where they treated women with fertility problems.

My paternal grandparents had four children - my dad, daughter Hermina, and sons Pavel and Jaroslav. Jaroslav was disabled due to an injury sustained in World War I and remained single. He didn't survive World War II.

Uncle Pavel married a Jewish woman called Betynka, with whom he had a daughter, Zdenicka, who was a year older than me. They perished in a concentration camp.

Aunt Hermina married a non-Jew, Dr. Reznicek, who was a high school teacher. They had two sons together, Milek and Zdenek, both of whom were sent to do forced labor. Milek escaped across the border to Switzerland, where he was initially arrested and was extremely lucky not to be sent back. He then got to England, where he went through pilot training, although he never got to fly. My uncle was held in a labor camp for non-Jewish partners of Jewish women. Aunt Hermina stayed in their small house, which they sublet to a young woman who was having an affair with a Gestapo man and who later informed on my aunt for listening to foreign radio stations. Hermina was then incarcerated in the Small Fortress [5](#) at Terezin. Milek and Zdenek emigrated in 1948, at first staying with friends in Belgium, where they put in applications at different embassies. The first to reply was the Bolivian Embassy. Apparently, they learnt to speak Spanish on the voyage over to Bolivia. In addition, they spoke Italian, German and French, because their father was a classic philologist with knowledge of many languages. Before the war, my uncle used to take the boys on vacation abroad. Although they went together, they each stayed at a different place, which was how the boys learnt languages.

My mom came from a large, religious family and had nine brothers and sisters - Izidor, the oldest, Serena, Koloman, Irma, Charlota, Ilona, Alzbeta, Mikulas, Marie. [In Hungarian: Izidor, Szerena, Kalman, Irma, Sarolta, Ilona, Erzsebet, Miklos and Maria. At the time most probably these were their official names registered in their documents with this spelling; being Hungarian speakers it is most likely that they used these names informally within the family later on too even though officially their names may have changed.] Most of her siblings lived in various places in Slovakia and were far less religious than their parents.

Before the outbreak of World War I, Izidor left for America, where he died at the end of the war. I know that he had three children - two boys who are no longer alive and a daughter who is still living in America. I met her there in the 1990s.

Serena was the only one of my mom's siblings who was very religious. She married Mr. Weiss, with whom she had two sons, Laci [diminutive for Laszlo] and Sandor. The whole family was deported to Auschwitz. Apart from Laci, none of them survived the Holocaust. Laci emigrated to Israel after the war.

Koloman worked in a bank. He was a frivolous person who sometimes had financial worries. He married an extremely talkative woman called Erzi [Erzsi, diminutive for Erzsebet, Alzbeta in Slovakian], with whom he had a son, Pista [diminutive for Istvan], my cousin. Pista went to a Slovak high school and, during the war, was sent to a labor camp in Hungary, from where he was then transported to a concentration camp. On the train journey, the guards made it be known that the prisoners were to be shot at the camp. Three of them escaped, including Pista. He got as far as Budapest, where he somehow managed to get a German uniform, in which he was later caught by the Russians who wanted to shoot him. He explained to them that he was a Jew who was wearing the uniform, as he had just escaped. As the officer who was interrogating him had a Jewish orderly, he got Pista to sing a Hebrew prayer to him to see if he really was a Jew. Pista had a beautiful voice and, what's more, came from a Jewish family, so he broke out in song, which saved his life. Afterwards, he lived in Hungary under the Hungarian name Perenyik and died at the age of about 70. He had one son.

Irma left for America before World War I. She married there and had one son. She lived in Brooklyn.

Charlota got married to a Jewish farmer called Kertesz [his family name was Kertesz], who had a farm in Hungary, not far from Miskolc. I saw very little of her, for it was a great distance in those days. They had two children, a son called Laci and a daughter called Pimpi [Pimpi is a nick name, does not correspond to any known Hungarian name]. Charlota was an amusing person. Apparently she came home late once and my grandfather got annoyed. Charlota told him it was ten o'clock, but then the clock struck one and my grandfather said, 'What are you talking about?' Charlota said, 'Well, it can't strike the zero.' All her family perished.

Ilona married and became Mrs. Kleinova, but didn't have any children. She lived in Kosice where she ran a powder and cosmetics factory with her husband. Neither of them survived the Holocaust.

Aunt Alzbeta was my favorite aunt. Before getting married, she graduated from a commercial high school. She worked and lived with us in Bratislava, as we had a large apartment there at the time. She then married a Jewish traveling salesman called Viliam Schaffer. Her husband wasn't home very often, due to the nature of his job, so she used to stay at our place. I loved her very much and

was very close to her. She was very witty. I knew my mom's side of the family the most. Dad's sister, Aunt Hermina, was once staying over at our place when Aunt Alzbeta came along. When dad brought her in, I ran up to her with joy, as I always did. Afterwards, mom told me off for never greeting Aunt Hermina in the same way. Aunt Alzbeta always had health problems. She loved children and in 1939 became pregnant, but because of the war she didn't want to have a child, so she gave it away. During the war, Alzbeta and her husband were in a camp in Novaky [6](#) and during the Slovak Uprising [7](#) they hid out in the mountains. They both survived the war. They didn't have any children later on.

After the war, I put on a lot of weight for a while and when Aunt Alzbeta came to see me in Prague, she said to me in Hungarian, 'Roll over to me'. She and her husband then decided to go to Israel. She wanted me to go with her, but by then I was in love with my future husband. At first they found it hard to get by. My uncle then got a decent job as a state official, but my aunt went to work as a maid. Afterwards, my uncle who, unlike my aunt had been as fit as a fiddle all his life, had a heart attack and within an hour she had lost him. She came to visit us some time in the 1960s, when such visits were slightly possible. I was overjoyed to see her. My husband tried to persuade her to stay here, as she was living alone in Israel. But she said she couldn't, as her husband's grave was over there. Later on, she spent a year with her sister Irma in America, but she didn't want to stay there, either. She died in Israel in 1991.

Mikulas was the youngest of my mom's brothers and he served in the Czechoslovak army. He worked for an insurance agency. He got married and had a son called Tom who perished in the Holocaust, as did his wife Vera. When Hungary occupied Kosice [see First Vienna Decision] [8](#), some time in 1939-40, Mikulas was incarcerated as a Communist. Afterwards, he apparently looked so terrible that not even his own family could recognize him. He then had to dig trenches on the front until the end of the war [see Working Battalion] [9](#). After the war, he married again, but didn't have any children with his second wife, Magda. He died soon afterwards of a heart attack.

Marie never married, for she was very choosy and never liked anyone enough, which annoyed her sisters. She was a cheerful woman, though. At first she lived in Kosice, later she moved to Ruthenia [Subcarpathia] [10](#) for work. She perished in Auschwitz.

## Growing up

Czech was spoken at our place, because my dad was a Czech. My mom was Hungarian, though, and when her sisters came to visit, they spoke Hungarian together, which my dad didn't understand at all. I was very curious to know what my aunts were saying, and I can remember standing by the window, writing down in capital letters the words I heard. I learnt the language by listening this way, although I never had a great command of the grammar.

We didn't eat kosher food at home, as we had Hungarian-Czech cuisine, such as dumplings, stuffed peppers, gnocchi with sheep's cheese and plum dumplings. Festive meals were held on Sunday, because dad worked on Saturdays. On Friday mom lit candles, but we went to the synagogue only on the high holidays. On Yom Kippur we fasted and on Pesach I always went with my mom to my grandparents in Kosice. I can remember, as the youngest, saying the mah nishtanah, and I translated it into Slovak as I had learnt it in religion lessons. This made the rest of the family laugh a lot. I can also remember how I stood in a sukkah during Sukkot and started whistling to myself,

whereupon my grandfather got very angry and told me that whistling wasn't allowed in a sukkah. I have a horrifying recollection of Yom Kippur. On the eve of the holiday, I had to pray with a hen in my hand, and with mom's help I swung it over my head in order to sacrifice it for my sins. To this day I can remember the hen flapping its wings and mom helping me to hold it by its legs and calming me down. This custom was called kapores.

I was an only child, well-loved and pampered, not only by my parents but especially by my mom's large family. On the whole I was a good child, except for not eating well. When I was five, my parents put me in a sanatorium for children with eating disorders in Vienna. We went there from Bratislava by train in the winter. At Christmas we had a tree and presents that parents had sent their children. I was the only one who didn't have a present under the tree, whereupon I proudly announced that this wasn't because my parents didn't like me, but because we were Jewish. One of the doctors then brought a toy car from somewhere and gave it to me. Christmas wasn't celebrated at our place, but we always went out to look at Christmas trees. I liked the trees very much, but I was never sorry that we didn't have one.

Because of my dad's job we moved house many times when I was a child. We moved from Kosice when I was still a baby. We went through Martin and Trnava, but I was too young to remember much about it. My first memories are of Bratislava, where I started to go to elementary school. The school was known as a training school, as teacher trainees did their teaching practice there. I can remember one teacher, Mr. Musil, who introduced what was then known as the global method, and even wrote some books about it. According to this method we learned to read words straight away, instead of reading by syllables. My dad was very unhappy about that, because he was convinced that you could never learn to read like that. There were also problems with writing, because the way they did it was to start with slanting lines. I can remember learning about Czech spelling with my dad whose voice always used to falter towards the end. The teacher I liked in the second grade was Mrs. Chrenkova. In the third grade I went to a Jewish elementary school in Zilina. I can remember the teachers there: Goldberger, Salg and Brunner. It was a very good school which was also attended by non-Jewish children.

I then went to a high school in Zilina, which I attended until the start of the third year. We then moved to Presov, but we only stayed there for half a year. The only difference between Bratislava and Zilina was that Bratislava was a much busier town. The difference between Zilina and Presov was much greater, however, for Presov was in the east. The girls at the school there spoke Saris dialect that I didn't understand. [Saris designates the area around Presov (it originates from Saros county before 1920). The Slovak dialect spoken there includes lots of Polish words.] The Jewish girls came mostly from religious families and wore stockings and long skirts. In the center of Presov there was only one attractive main street.

In Presov I made friends with Miluse Preiningerova, who was a Czech non-Jewish girl whose father was serving there as an officer. I had both Jewish and non-Jewish friends, as did my parents. A lot of my dad's friends were Czech officials. My mom knew slightly different people, so it was all nicely mixed. I found it hard to make friends, as it takes me quite a long time to get to know people, and it was difficult for me with all that moving about. In Zilina I made friends with Duca Robinsonova and she has remained a friend to this day. Her parents had a house with a garden where we spent a lot of time. We went skating in winter and swimming in summer. I collected photographs of actors in an album. In those days, they used to give out two-page programs with film synopses, which I

also collected, with the help of Aunt Alzbeta.

The apartments in which we lived were set aside for the heads of revenue offices, so they were all very nice. In Presov we lived in an old palace. The dining area was in a huge room, but we didn't use it very much because it was hard to keep warm. We had a wood-burning stove, as there was plenty of wood in Slovakia, and it created a beautiful, pure heat with a nice scent. We always had a maid at home, and in Presov an assistant at dad's office, Mr. Borodac, helped out by bringing wood and doing whatever was necessary. We also had dogs - two fox terriers, but they both died - and then we had a canary for a long time. In 1938 I got a Maltese pinscher puppy, but I had to return him when we moved to Bohemia.

My mom used to read a lot. We didn't have Hungarian books, so mom would borrow one from time to time, but mostly she read in German, especially [Franz] Werfel, [Thomas] Mann and [Stefan] Zweig [11](#). She didn't read many books in Czech, but she liked Capek [12](#) and 'Golet in the Valley' [novel by Ivan Olbracht (1882-1952): Czech prose-writer and journalist]. My dad read much less. In one room we had a library with the kind of literature and collected works that people from the better families were 'supposed to have'. We took the furniture with us when we moved, but all I now have from the apartment is a carpet.

In our free time we often went for walks, as we didn't have a car. When my dad got into fishing, we would go to the river and then eat trout, if he caught any. My dad had four weeks off, so we also went on vacation. Sometimes we would go to a spa, usually Marianske Lazne, and sometimes my parents went off on their own, leaving me at my grandparents' place in Kosice or with Aunt Hermina in Klatovy. I also went on trips with mom around Slovakia, traveling to Piestany, Trencianske Teplice and the Tatras. For a long time we were planning to go to the seaside in Yugoslavia, but then the war broke out.

We left Slovakia as all Czech state officials had to return to Bohemia. My dad was supposed to have taken office in Prague, but as this was just after the Nazi occupation [see Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia] [13](#), he didn't. He received a basic salary but was no longer employed. When we were moving, Slovak guardsmen checked all out furniture that we were sending to Prague, to see if we were smuggling anything. That was very unpleasant. Otherwise I didn't encounter any specific manifestation of anti-Semitism directed against me before the war. All I can remember is an incident on a train when I was traveling with my mom from Zilina to see my grandparents in Kosice. We were sitting in a compartment with a man who was calling Jews names. He talked about how young Jewish women were all made up and such like. He then said to my mom who, as I mentioned earlier, spoke Czech without an accent, 'You, dear lady, look like a modest Czech woman.' In reply, mom said, 'Yes, and I am Jewish.' The man then stood up and went straight out of the compartment.

We toyed with the idea of emigrating. My parents put in an application for a US visa, but unfortunately our relatives abroad were not wealthy enough to speed things up in any way. My parents wanted to send me away. I know that they made arrangements with someone in England and that they wanted to send me off to do a nursing course. But when the war broke out in September, my mom was to have an operation and I didn't want to leave her on her own, and after that it wasn't possible to go anywhere.

I completed the fourth grade at the high school on Lobkowitz Square in Prague, but then said I wouldn't stay on because of the anti-Semitism that was prevalent there. Perhaps I judged them unfairly back then. It was a time when children were arriving from Slovakia and the Sudetenland [14](#), and the classes were crammed full, so the teachers must have been in over their heads. When I look back, I feel that I felt bad myself at having to leave Slovakia, which was a huge change for me. I joined the class in March and the 1939/40 school year was already over in June. I didn't even have time to make any friends, and besides there were only boys in the class, apart from me and another girl. I must have sensed some kind of general anti-Semitism, but I can't remember anything specific. I can even remember a fellow-pupil having a Jewish funeral, at which our class teacher spoke. That was in 1939, when the remains of Karel Hynek Macha were brought over to Prague and put on display at the National Museum. [Macha, Karel Hynek (1810-1836): Czech poet and prose-writer, the most noted representative of Czech Romanticism and founder of modern Czech poetry.] There were visits by school to see them, including one by our class. As we were going down Slezska Street, a former classmate who had left the school - probably because his parents were about to emigrate - was riding his bike opposite us on the road. The boys started to shout at him, and he turned round to see us but crashed headfirst into a truck. He died on the spot.

A year after I left high school I would have been prohibited from attending anyway [see Exclusion of Jews from schools in the Protectorate] [15](#). I then attended a yearly English language course at the Modern Language Institute, where the classes were separated to Jewish and non-Jewish, which was very pleasant for me as we were among ourselves there and felt that nobody would turn up their nose at us. I had taken private French lessons with Mrs. Fabryova in Slovakia. I excercised on the music but I didn't go to Maccabi [16](#) or Sokol, for I didn't like group sports or the smell of the changing rooms.

## During the war

From 1940 onwards I took an apprenticeship with a hat-making firm on Wenceslas Square. I made friends there with a Jewish girl called Dita. She was tall and blonde, a beautiful girl. I was small, so I would say to her for fun, 'Dita, everything is fine, but we won't walk on the street together.' I met her after the war. She knew my friends, so she told me about them.

In September 1941 we were moved out of our apartment in Vinohrady to Rybna Street. I can remember there being a bar downstairs in the house. We were moved into an apartment together with four other Jewish families. A month later we were assembled at the Trade Fair grounds in Prague and then deported to Lodz [17](#). We didn't have any roots in Prague. Neither did we have any proper friends who could have done something to prevent us from being selected for the second transport. I can remember arriving in the ghetto at Lodz, which was a completely different world. Later on, I would often say that it was clear that they sent people to die there but incomprehensible that people lived there.

The ghetto was established in the suburbs of Lodz, in the area known as Baluty. According to my Polish friends, it was originally inhabited by the Lumpenproletariat. They said that wherever a thief was caught in the past, he probably came from Baluta. There was no sewerage system there. A tram went through the middle of the ghetto. It was quite common for a person to work in one part of the ghetto and live in the other. In certain areas there were guards who opened gates at

crossing points when people gathered together to get from one side to the other. There was also a wooden bridge over the road for the trams. We were given minimum rations. People cooked for themselves, but the problem was a lack of food and coal, which was why there were common places where people went to heat up their water or to cook. It was called 'Gaskueche' or 'Gaspunkt' [German for 'gaskitchen' and 'gaspoint']. I can remember how people always wrapped their warm pots in covers so that the food would still be a bit warm by the time they got home. As there was a shortage of burners, people had to wait in line, which naturally led to arguments and people pushing in.

After arriving in the ghetto we were placed in a school in Lagevnicka Street. There were several bunk beds in a shared room, but some people were sleeping on the floor. We were lucky to get a bunk bed. On one side were the Wertheimers, on the other the Hahns, who were either emigrants from the Sudetenland or German Germans, because they spoke German.

I couldn't eat the first bowl of soup we were given. Outside there were dirty, impoverished people who were waiting for us to give them that pigswill. So I went down with my mess-tin and when I got back, I was very unhappy and terribly ashamed as I felt disgusted by those people and that I had no right to feel this way. It was at that moment that Dr. Hahn quoted Kant [Immanuel (1724-1804), German philosopher], I think. He said words to the effect that a good deed is worth more when we overcome our distaste at the same time. This helped me very much back then. So, various people lived in one heap. The living conditions were dire and there was no sign of things getting better. The news that went around among the inmates only increased their fears. Hunger led to animosity and mutual incriminations. A huge advantage of mine was that I had never been a big eater, so with my frail physique, I didn't suffer from hunger as much as my mom and dad.

My mom remembered that a Jewish soldier from Lodz used to come to our place for food during World War I, so she tried to find him in the ghetto. In doing so, she met some people who took us into their tiny little apartment. They came from Lodz and helped us, although there was obviously a certain antagonism between Polish and Czech Jews. Just as soon as transports came from Czechoslovakia and other countries, the Germans started to move the locals out. And they felt that not only were we depriving them of their meager rations, but that they also had to leave on account of us. Furthermore, the relationship of western Jews towards those from the east had always been a bit dismissive.

Poles were not the only ones to be evacuated, however, for many people from the Prague transports ended their lives in the extermination camp of Chelmno [in Poland]. Among them was my dad's cousin, Dr. Emil Benes, who was with us on the transport train from Prague. He couldn't bear the oppressiveness and horror of the ghetto - in general, men found it harder to endure everything. He voluntarily put his name forward for deportation in 1942. He was a very sensitive and educated person who loved Prague and Czech literature. I can remember him in the ghetto showing me a folded piece of paper that had turned yellow with age and on which was typewritten Petr Bezruc's poem 'Only Once'. [Bezruc, Petr pseudonym of Vladimir Vasek (1867-1958): Czech poet, called the bard of Silesia, known for his 'Silesian Songs'.] Ordinary people who were alone did not have the strength to struggle on. I can remember a young, very pretty girl who came on our transport train. She couldn't endure such a life from the very outset, when we were living in the shared billet, so she threw herself into a wire fence and was shot. Another thing I can never forget is the public execution of two people who had been caught trying to escape. It was in the winter,

and we all had to gather on Baluty Square to witness the execution.

The second thing that mom managed to do was to get us a room of our own in a house on Mlynarska Street. The house was obviously without a sewage system and the toilets were outside. Our room was on the first floor. There was a kitchen and two plank beds, as well as our cases and a stove. An elderly couple lived in the kitchen and I can remember the shock when the lady brushed the bugs off the bed in the morning. Whenever something like that happened for the first time, you always felt it couldn't happen to you.

My mom also managed to find work for us all. Having work meant having some hope of survival. I worked at the 'Leder und Sattler Ressort' [German for 'Leather and Saddlery section'], which was involved in saddle-making. My mom also worked there, but in a different building. She was in the storeroom, while I worked on a trestle, where I sewed together small pieces of leather. I have fond memories of the time I spent there, because I made some wonderful friends. They were young Polish Jews, mostly around my age. It was thanks to them that I regained my purpose in life, which I had completely lost before. I was the only Czech among them, so I learnt to speak Polish very well. We were great idealists in those terrible conditions, for we often spoke about what the world would be like in the future. We helped each other out a lot. It was a matter of course that we shared things with whoever fell sick. I can remember Hana Chlopicka. She was a nice girl, and when she was sick, we each gave her at least some of our rations. She died of quick consumption. So did Honza Abeles, a friend of mine from Prague. I saw him from time to time and we always said to each other that nobody would believe what we had gone through. Once he whistled at me from a courtyard, and when I came down I couldn't recognize him. He died shortly afterwards.

The worst time was always when they were getting ready for displacement, or 'wysiedlenie' as it was called. Nobody knew who would be selected. When the time came, one part of the ghetto was sealed off, which came to be known as the 'Sperre' [German for 'barrier']. This part was then surrounded, people had to get out of their apartments and appear before the SS-men who then selected who to leave and who to take. I can remember two such displacements. Once there was complete silence in the house as everybody had run away, and I told my dad that we, too, should get away. But dad didn't want to, as he thought it wasn't possible to escape, when the order was given to stay where we were. Later on, my mom and I managed to persuade him. In this instance, however, it was in fact impossible for us to escape, so we had to go down to the street. It was always said that the Germans mostly went for gray-haired people with glasses. My dad was 58 years old, had gray hair and wore a beard and glasses. So, I blackened his beard and hair with something and I went first, followed by mom with dad behind. I can remember a moment when I turned round and saw them stand behind me, which meant that we had managed to go through the Sperre. So, we managed to survive until 1944.

Some time in the summer of 1944 the word started to get round in official places that the entire ghetto would be relocated. This could have meant anything. My dad was unable to walk at the time, as he was suffering from muscle deficiency. He stayed at home while mom and I went to work. On 11th August 1944 I stayed behind at work, as usual, because I was having a chat with my friends. Suddenly my mom appeared and to this day I can still hear her voice, as she said to me, 'Viera, something terrible has happened, your dad has committed suicide.' After putting his cover to one side so as not to stain it with blood, my dad had slit his veins. He left a letter in which he wrote that he did it because he would have been in our way when the time came to escape.

Afterwards, it wasn't possible to go out to work, so me and my mom started hiding in attics. Among the young people of Lodz, there was a kind of resistance organization, which was structured in such a way that its members only knew the closest people involved. The main idea was for everybody to try and hold out for as long as possible. Later, my mom said that she couldn't stay in hiding any longer. Naturally, I didn't want to leave her alone, so we were deported together to the concentration camp Auschwitz.

We arrived in Auschwitz in August 1944. We got off the cattle cars to the roar of "Los! Los!" [German for 'get moving'] and then we went through the selection. I was shocked by everything and didn't at all realize what it meant when my mom went to the other side during the selection. At first, I went through the usual procedure of having my hair cut off and shaved and then I was given some rags. Nobody believed what in fact was going on in Auschwitz. When we went between the wire fences to have our hair cut off, still looking relatively normal, there were shaved people behind the fence who were jumping around and shouting at us, 'Throw us your bread, throw us everything you have, they'll take it off you anyway.' Somebody then said to me, 'Well, it can't be so terrible here if they keep loonies.' None of us realized that in half an hour we would look just the same. I was sent to camp C. The block where I was placed was inhabited mostly by Poles from Lodz, as well as some Hungarians. The head of the block was a Polish Jewish woman, who had emigrated to Israel [then Palestine] and had been visiting relatives in Poland at the outbreak of war. Her family was in Israel, but she wasn't able to return there.

It's impossible to describe fall and winter in Auschwitz. We walked around in clogs on our bare feet. Clogs would get stuck in the mud and you couldn't lift your foot when that happened. They also tore your skin until it bled. Each of us knew what it was to fight over soup or over who would get an extra potato. We didn't go to work; we just waited to see if we would be picked for work or sent to the gas chamber. People still didn't really believe what was actually happening in Auschwitz. I can remember one day that was quite nice, when we were sitting outside and chatting. We spoke about what had happened to those who went to the other side during the selection. I can remember one Orthodox Jewish woman from Slovakia. What saved her when she arrived in Auschwitz was that her mother, by coincidence, was holding her child. I can remember her saying repeatedly, 'I don't believe there are gas chambers here and that they burn people. If I don't see my mother with my son, there is no God.' And that was somebody for whom God was the meaning of life.

After three months in Auschwitz, I was picked during a roll-call and taken away in a cattle car, along with some other people. I didn't know what would happen. We traveled two or three days in the cattle cars until we reached Mezimesti near Broumov in Bohemia. At the time it was called Halbstadt. We got out of the cattle cars at night, so that nobody would see us. We were lucky in that they hadn't had time to build a labor camp for us, so we were billeted in a weaving mill. Not far away was a camp for forced laborers from Alsace-Lorraine who had refused to profess allegiance to Germany. [The French province was occupied by German troops in 1940 and was attached to the Reich.]

There were 600 of us, mostly Polish women, but also some Hungarians and a few Czechs. Initially, I did mechanical work at a machine, which was unpleasant, because ugly thoughts run through your head when you do automatic work like that. But then my knowledge of languages came in handy, as it had done on several previous occasions. One of the girls was having an affair with one of the French forced laborers and he had taken her on as an assistant, so I was able to interpret for them.

He wanted to repay me in some way, so he asked if I had ever been interested in machines. I said I hadn't. He then asked if I at least understood machines, and again I said no. So he then took a milling machine apart in front of me and told me to put it together again. I would probably still be putting it together to this day. However, he was about as concerned for the victory of the Reich as I was, so he took me on as his assistant. Working in shifts, it helped me a lot that I didn't have to sit and think all the time. Our supervisors were SS-women, and the person in charge of us was a German Jewish woman called Jutta. As we were always doing something wrong, the supervisors kept threatening to send us back to Auschwitz. I can remember people from Alsace arriving in January 1945 who told us, 'Well they may as well send you to Auschwitz now.' They had a radio in the camp, you see, so we found out that Auschwitz had fallen. [Auschwitz was liberated by Soviet troops on 27th January 1945.]

## Post-war

We stayed in Mezimesti until May 1945. I recall that they locked us in and kept threatening to blow us up, so we were afraid of going to sleep. From the windows we could see the Germans running away in an attempt to get to the Americans. After the departure of the Germans and just before the arrival of the Russians, a group of Frenchmen burst in with a sack of sugar from a nearby sugar refinery. They broke down the door and shouted out, 'Das Judenlager ist frei' [German for 'The Jewish camp is free']. It was the most beautiful moment of liberation. Nobody had known about our camp in Broumov. Jutta, another girl and I went to Broumov, to ask for some help there. In the village they gaped at us in total surprise, not knowing where we had come from or that a camp had been there. This was in the Sudetenland. I can also remember the arrival of the Russians, with red flags fluttering everywhere, the swastikas having been cut off.

I knew that my parents were no longer alive, so I started thinking about what to do next. I was afraid to go home, so I decided to go back with the Polish girls to Poland. Then, one day, a Czech truck came for sugar. There was a Czech gendarme who was sitting inside, so I asked him where they were going and if they could take me with them. They agreed to take me, so I went to say goodbye to the girls. When I met them over forty years later in Israel, they told me that they could still see me as I left them and headed off for the truck. When I got on, the Czech gendarme said to me, 'Well, little girl, how old are you?' I said I was twenty-one, but he didn't believe me. 'Go on, you can tell the truth, you have nothing to fear.'

We got as far as Police nad Metuji, where I got on a full train to Prague. We went via Nachod and I could hear people calling for each other. Somebody called out, 'Is there anyone going to Zilina?' It was a girl with whom I used to go to rhythmic class. She said that I had to get off, as I should go to the principal of the high school, Mr. Vavra, who was in Nachod. So I got off the train, spent the night at Mr. Vavra's place and then went on to Prague, arriving at Masaryk Station.

I arrived in Prague in May 1945 on the same day as Benes [18](#). I didn't know where to go. I remembered that some friends of my parents, the Jahns, lived on Vinohrady Avenue, so I headed off there. There was no transportation, so I walked. The shoes I was wearing had been soled from a transmission belt by one of the girls in Mezimesti. The Jahns lived on the fifth floor. The elevator wasn't working, so I walked up the steps and rung the bell, but nobody answered the door. A neighbor then told me that the Jahns weren't in Prague. Although I don't cry easily, I couldn't stop

myself. I burst into tears, wondering about what to do next. Then I remembered I had a good friend in town, called Kveta Blazkova. We had both been interested in books and the theater and I had left a lot of things at her place - girl's treasures like diaries and such like, which seemed important when you were seventeen.

Kveta lived on Pod Kvetnice Street in Pankrac, Prague, so I went to see her. When I rung the bell, she came to open the door wearing a towel around her head, as she had been washing her hair. She welcomed me as if she had seen me yesterday. It was very nice to see her and she said of course, I could stay at her place. She asked me about what I had been through, like the others. I didn't like to speak about it, because nobody could understand what it was really like anyway. So I stayed with Kveta and thought about what to do next. I didn't know how to do anything, as I had only completed the fourth grade of high school. It occurred to me that I could get a job selling books at a bookstore, as I liked books. I then met my parents' friends and they had a long talk with me, saying that my dad wouldn't forgive me if I didn't continue with my studies. So, I soon did my school-leaving exams and then, still in 1945, applied to the Philosophy Faculty of Charles University in Prague to do a combined degree in English and Czech.

After the war I got back my parents' two-bedroom apartment in V Hornich Stromkach Street, Vinohrady. A couple with a child was living in a small, one-bedroom apartment in the house. I knew that none of my family would be coming back, so I suggested to the couple that we could swap apartments, and that's what we did. Later on, I received a visit from Tibor, the brother of my friend Duca from Zilina. Duca went through Auschwitz and was liberated in Bergen-Belsen. She remembered waking up in a white bed in hospital and she thought she must be in heaven. She told me that when she returned home, the first person she met was the collaborator who had been watching them when they were caught. So she reported him to the police who took him in but released him a week later. Tibor told me that Duca's nerves were in a bad state. So I invited her to Prague and we lived together in my small apartment until 1950, when I got married. Duca then moved back to Bratislava, but we still meet up to this day. She became a photographer. In the 1960s she was sent by an international agency to Israel to take photographs for a book. The preface was to have been written by Arnost Lustig [Czech prose-writer, born in Prague in 1926, survived the Holocaust, emigrated in 1968] but, when he emigrated, he hid the text of the preface along with the photos in a wall at his cottage. It was as if the photos had disappeared into thin air. They didn't turn up until after 1989. In the 1990s, the Jewish Museum in Bratislava hosted an exhibition of Duca's photos and the book was finally published under the title 'Walled-in Paintings'.

I can remember sitting at home during the February 1948 [19](#) events. It was exam time and I was tucked into a blanket, listening to the radio. I was completely shuddering, although I wasn't cold. I had never trusted the Communists. I know that a lot of young people who had come back from concentration camps thought that Communism was a possible way forward. My friends in the ghetto were not Communists exactly, but they were certainly leftist in their thinking. Even back then I said that I couldn't be like a horse with its blinkers on and forced to look in one direction. That was also a reason why I wasn't overcome by enthusiasm in 1948. But I understand that my generation had experienced great disappointment and saw Communism as the only possibility of creating a better world. Nonetheless, on the insistence of my husband, I joined the Communist Party [20](#) some time after 1960. After 1968 [see Prague Spring] [21](#), however, we were both thrown out of the Party.

After completing my studies, I worked as a teacher all my life. I started teaching in 1950 at a secondary school in Kostelec nad Labem, an hour long bus journey away from where I lived. I then got married and became pregnant, which was why I requested to be transferred to a school in Prague. At the People's Committee [communist era local government authority] they told me, 'Comrade, if you taught math, it could be done straight away, but with your subject...' I told them that in my state I couldn't commute each day on an hour long bumpy bus ride, so I was given a place at an elementary school in Vrsovice, Prague. A few years later I moved to a nine-year elementary school and then, at the beginning of the 1960s, to a high school, where I finally got to teach my subject. A few years later I moved to a secondary industrial school. In 1970, I was transferred to a school in Jecna Street, Prague. Two years later, the school principal came up to me and told me he had no alternative but to dismiss me. That was because of my expulsion from the Communist Party. Under Act 255/1946 [22](#), thanks to my testimonial, I was able to take early retirement, so I agreed to the dismissal and left the school.

I didn't experience any specific anti-Semitism against me after the war. This happened only once, in the middle of the 1950s, on the day when an article appeared in the papers about Jewish doctors who had allegedly attempted to kill Stalin and even to poison Gorky [see Doctor's Plot] [23](#). At the time, teachers who were to receive a salary increase, had to undergo an interview before a commission at the People's Committee, which was also attended by the Chairman of the Revolutionary Resistance Movement, the Chairman of the Communist Party, a school inspector, among others. Somehow I wasn't worried about this, because all my life I had read the papers and knew that I would be able to say what they wanted to hear. First of all, they discussed politics with me and then they asked me what I thought of the news about the Jewish doctors. I replied that I didn't understand it, as doctors were supposed to save lives, but I felt that they were trying to get me in a corner, so as to get back to my Jewishness. One of the people there was my later boss. I had never hid my origin and, besides, they obviously had my files in front of them. Even my pupils knew about my origin, because I talked about my own experiences when we discussed World War II.

After that, they discussed Slansky [24](#), pointing out that Jews were always well off materially. At this point I got angry. I said that I didn't know what Jews they had in mind, but that I had grown up in Eastern Slovakia where there was a lot of poverty. I also spoke about my Polish friends from the ghetto who had told me that Lodz was a very industrial city and that most of their fathers were tailors, as there was a large textile factory there, and that they remembered that as small children they stood on stools so as to help out with the ironing.

Shortly before that interview I had seen a theater performance of Tyl's 'Stubborn Woman', so I told them that I recall that Tyl knew that it wasn't possible to generalize. [Tyl, Josef Kajetan (1808-1856): Czech dramatist, actor, prose-writer and journalist, main representative of sentimental patriotic romanticism, organizer of national cultural life.] In that play there is a scene where a door-to-door salesman is sitting in a pub and along comes an alderman who tells him to leave. The salesman asks why he should leave when he had done nothing wrong. The alderman gives him a gruff reply, whereupon the salesman says, 'You have something against me, Ezechiel, or against Jews?' The alderman doesn't understand, so the salesman continues, 'Well, if you have something against me specifically, that's fair enough, but you can't despise Jews for what these salesmen are doing, as they aren't allowed to do anything else. They can't marry as they would like, or move,

and they can't own land, so they have absolutely no alternative but to do what they are doing.' After I had said this to the commission, things quieted down and they didn't ask me anything else. As I mentioned above, I later taught at a school where one of the commission members was principal. I wasn't at all keen on going there, but there was nothing to be done. He always called me by my first name, but I was always on formal terms with him. In the end, I forgave him when we met at a gathering of teachers from that school, years later. He was old and deaf and sitting alone at a table, so I felt I had to sit next to him and I forgave him.

My husband was called Jaroslav Slesinger. He was born in 1903 in Chocen, and came from a Czech family. He qualified as an engineer and worked as a state official in Slovakia before the war and as an engineer for Pragovka [car factory] after the war. I met him through friends. We got married in 1950 and had a very nice marriage. He didn't come from a Jewish family, but he was one of the few genuine 'philosemites'. He never considered converting, but there wasn't a shred of anti-Semitism in him. I didn't long to be married to a Jew, in fact, I felt that I didn't want my children to have to go through what I had.

Our son Honza was born in 1951, our daughter Helena a year later. Both are living in Prague. Honza completed his secondary education and Helena has a university degree in economics. Helena works as an economist for a law firm and Honza is a computer programmer for a bank. I have two grandchildren. I taught English to both of my children and to my grandchildren. I didn't bring them up in the Jewish tradition, but they always knew that I was Jewish. Honza even joined the Jewish community, as I did in the 1980s. During the Communist regime I corresponded with Aunt Alzbeta in Israel and she was here once on a visit, so my children have known everything about it since they were children. Later on, they learnt about the Holocaust themselves. My granddaughter was with me in Israel and she liked it there very much. I can remember that my grandson, when he was little, once asked me what Jews were. I said to him, 'Well, have a look at me, do you think I'm different from anyone else?'

After 1968, my husband considered emigrating to Israel, but I talked him out of it. He was a great supporter of Israel, which was one of the reasons why he was thrown out of the Party. I was never a Zionist, nor were my parents, but I was interested in what was going on in Israel. However, the coverage in Czech newspapers of the conflicts over there were very biased. The Israelis were seen as the ones who had caused the war, as the aggressors. I went to Israel to visit Aunt Alzbeta about a year after my husband's death [in 1981]. I managed to get there in 1982 after complicated dealings involving my permit, which I was surprised to get. I spent a month there with my aunt. She was already 80 at the time, and we were both very happy to see each other. The second time I went to Israel was on a trip organized by the Jewish community of Prague. That was just after 1989, but my aunt was no longer alive then. Since then, I've been there another three times. My cousin Laci's son still lives there, and he now has a large family, with six sons. Apart from Hebrew, he can also speak Hungarian, Czech and Slovak. I can communicate with his children in English, but his wife speaks only Hebrew. Other than that, I go there to see the 'girls' from Mezimesti.

My husband and I were friends with Mr. and Mrs. Matejec, whose children were the same age as ours. Anca Matejcova was a doctor and her husband was a lawyer. They weren't Jews, but there wasn't a shred of anti-Semitism in Anca. We were also great friends with a teacher colleague of mine, Hanka. I was lucky with Hankas, for my next friend was Hanka Properova, who had been with me in Lodz, where she worked in the 'Gaskueche'. I didn't meet her there, but my mom told me

about a young Polish girl in the 'Gaskueche' who had been very kind to her, always letting her come to the flame and not letting her wait pointlessly. At the beginning of the 1950s, I was walking with my pram when, all of a sudden, a woman asked me if I was Pollakova and if I had been in Lodz. That was the girl my mom had spoken about. She recognized me because I resemble my mom. We have been friends since then, and we have visited each other. I have even taught her children English.

One of my best friends was Hanka Vosatkova. She was Jewish but lived in a mixed marriage. Her husband was a doctor in Jindrichuv Hradec. They got divorced before the war, so she was deported to Terezin. My husband's family took her son into their care. In 1947, her son left for England, where she sent him to do a course in order to learn languages and find out about the world. But then came the February coup in 1948. In the 1960s, she managed to get over to see him. I can remember how afraid she was, for the last time they had seen each other he was a young boy and now he was married and had a child. She spent some time with him there and then she returned to Czechoslovakia. She went to England once more in 1968, where she then stayed. Unfortunately, she is no longer alive, but I have been over five times with her son at his invitation. He now lives in the state of Utah. I usually flew via New York, as I have some friends there, too.

When my children were young, we used to go to Chocen, which is where my husband came from. His dad and sister were still alive then. Later on, we used to go on vacations, usually to the Svaty Petr area in the Giant Mountains, where we stayed in a rented room. At the beginning of the 1960s, my husband had a heart attack, so we had to cancel our holidays in the mountains. We then bought a cottage by the Sazava River in Samopse, which is between Sazava and Ledecek. My husband was very fond of that place, for it was so beautiful. Nobody else lived around us and there was a weir below the cottage. However, I didn't like the fact that we were alone there and that there was no settlement nearby. Whenever I grumbled about it, though, my husband would ask me if I really wanted to have people looking in at us. After his death, however, I stopped going to the cottage. My son got divorced around that time and he, too, didn't go there, so I decided to sell the cottage, but he asked me to keep hold of it, as he was very fond of the place. He started going there again and has since spruced it up with his girlfriend. There is electricity and much greater comfort now. I don't go to the cottage very often, because it's not the same without my husband. But I enjoy the peace and quiet of the nature there and I always think how pleased my husband would be at the way Honza has improved it.

I didn't keep to Jewish traditions at home. We didn't have kosher meals, nor did we observe Sabbath. I went to the synagogue only on the New Year and Yom Kippur. I started to celebrate Christmas only after the war, when I got married. But Christmas has never meant very much to me. I wouldn't bother with it today, but ever since my husband's death I visit my children at Christmas.

I rejoiced at the revolution in 1989 [see Velvet Revolution] [25](#). I found out about what had happened on Narodni Avenue [brutal police intervention on student demonstration] from the radio. I listened to Radio Free Europe [26](#), as did a lot of people, but I preferred the BBC. In November 1989 we were in a state of pleasant shock and suspense, as we didn't know what would happen next. Life hasn't changed so much for me since the revolution. The main thing is that I am now free to travel. I get frustrated, albeit in a healthy way, at politics and the world. I often think of how, during the war, we imagined that the world would be a fairer place and how there would be no more wars - surely they couldn't be repeated after all we have gone through. We didn't know if we

would survive, but we were sure that if we made it, we would certainly have things to look forward to, for everything would be beautiful in the world.

## Glossary

### 1 Sokol

One of the best-known Czech sports organizations. It was founded in 1862 as the first physical educational organization in the Austro- Hungarian Monarchy. Besides regular training of all age groups, units organized sports competitions, colorful gymnastics rallies, cultural events including drama, literature and music, excursions and youth camps. Although its main goal had always been the promotion of national health and sports, Sokol also played a key role in the national resistance to the Austro- Hungarian Empire, the Nazi occupation and the communist regime. Sokol flourished between the two World Wars; its membership grew to over a million. Important statesmen, including the first two presidents of interwar Czechoslovakia, Tomas Masaryk and Edvard Benes, were members of Sokol. Sokol was banned three times: during World War I, during the Nazi occupation and finally by the communists after 1948, but branches of the organization continued to exist abroad. Sokol was restored in 1990. 2 KuK (Kaiserlich und Koeniglich) army: The name 'Imperial and Royal' was used for the army of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, as well as for other state institutions of the Monarchy originated from the dual political system. Following the Compromise of 1867, which established the Dual Monarchy, Austrian emperor and Hungarian King Franz Joseph was the head of the state and also commander-in-chief of the army. Hence the name 'Imperial and Royal'. 3 Italian front, 1915-1918: Also known as Isonzo front. Isonzo (Soca) is an alpine river today in Slovenia, which ran parallel with the pre-World War I Austro-Hungarian and Italian border. During World War I Italy was primarily interested in capturing the ethnic Italian parts of Austria- Hungary (Triest, Fiume, Istria and some of the islands) as well as the Adriatic litoral. The Italian army tried to enter Austria-Hungary via the Isonzo river, but the Austro-Hungarian army was dug in alongside the river. After 18 months of continous fighting without any territorial gain, the Austro-Hungarian army finally succeeded to enter Italian territory in October 1917. 4 Marianske Lazne/Marienbad: a world-famous spa in the Czech Republic, founded in the early 19th century, with many curative mineral springs and baths, and situated on the grounds of a 12th-century abbey. Once the playground for the Habsburgs and King Edward VII, as well as famous personalities including Goethe, Strauss, Ibsen and Kipling, Marianske Lazne has been the site of numerous international congresses in recent years. 5 Small Fortress (Mala pevnost) in Theresienstadt: An infamous prison, used by two totalitarian regimes: Nazi Germany and communist Czechoslovakia. It was built in the 18th century as a part of a fortification system and almost from the beginning it was used as a prison. In 1940 the Gestapo took it over and kept mostly political prisoners there: members of various resistance movements. Approximately 32,000 detenees were kept in Small Fortress during the Nazi occupation. Communist Czechoslovakia continued using it as a political prison; after 1945 German civilians were confined there before they were expelled from the country. 6 Novaky labor camp: established in 1941 in the central-Slovakian town of Novaky. In an area of 2.27 km<sup>2</sup> 24 barracks were built, which accommodated 2,500-3,000 people in 1943. Many of the people detained in Novaky were transported to the Polish camps. The camp was liberated by the partisans on 30th August 1944 and the inmates joined the partisans. 7 Slovak Uprising: At Christmas 1943 the Slovak National Council was formed, consisting of various oppositional groups (communists, social democrats, agrarians etc.). Their aim was to

fight the Slovak fascist state. The uprising broke out in Banska Bystrica, central Slovakia, on 20th August 1944. On 18th October the Germans launched an offensive. A large part of the regular Slovak army joined the uprising and the Soviet Army also joined in. Nevertheless the Germans put down the riot and occupied Banska Bystrica on 27th October, but weren't able to stop the partisan activities. As the Soviet army was drawing closer many of the Slovak partisans joined them in Eastern Slovakia under either Soviet or Slovak command.

## **8 First Vienna Decision**

On 2nd November 1938 a German-Italian international committee in Vienna obliged Czechoslovakia to surrender much of the southern Slovakian territories that were inhabited mainly by Hungarians. The cities of Kassa (Kosice), Komarom (Komarno), Ersekujvar (Nove Zamky), Ungvar (Uzhorod) and Munkacs (Mukacevo), all in all 11.927 km<sup>2</sup> of land, and a population of 1.6 million people became part of Hungary. According to the Hungarian census in 1941 84% of the people in the annexed lands were Hungarian-speaking.

## **9 Working Battalion**

According to a Hungarian law passed in 1939, those unable to serve in the military were obliged to do 'work service'. The Jews not drafted into the Hungarian army for armed service were to join these 'special work battalions'. A decree in 1941 obliged all Jewish men to be recruited to work battalions instead of regular army units. In 1942 more than 50,000 of them were taken to the Ukrainian front, along with the Second Hungarian Army; only 6-7000 of them survived.

## **10 Subcarpathia (also known as Ruthenia, Russian and Ukrainian name Zakarpatie)**

Region situated on the border of the Carpathian Mountains with the Middle Danube lowland. The regional capitals are Uzhhorod, Berehovo, Mukachevo, Khust. It belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy until World War I; and the Saint-Germain convention declared its annexation to Czechoslovakia in 1919. It is impossible to give exact historical statistics of the language and ethnic groups living in this geographical unit: the largest groups in the interwar period were Hungarians, Rusyns, Russians, Ukrainians, Czech and Slovaks. In addition there was also a considerable Jewish and Gypsy population. In accordance with the first Vienna Decision of 1938, the area of Subcarpathia mainly inhabited by Hungarians was ceded to Hungary. The rest of the region was proclaimed a new state called Carpathian Ukraine in 1939, with Khust as its capital, but it only existed for four and a half months, and was occupied by Hungary in March 1939.

Subcarpathia was taken over by Soviet troops and local guerrillas in 1944. In 1945, Czechoslovakia ceded the area to the USSR and it gained the name Carpatho-Ukraine. The region became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1945. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, the region became an administrative region under the name of Transcarpathia.

## **11 Zweig, Stefan (1881-1942)**

Austrian biographer, novelist, essayist and playwright, best known for his humanistic view on European culture expressed in his essays and biographies of major literary and historical figures. Among his most famous fictional works are his only novel, 'Beware of Pity' and the novella 'The Royal Game'; his best-known drama is the biblical play 'Jeremias'. Zweig left Austria in 1938, first

for England then Brazil. In despair over the defeat of humanism in the Third Reich, Zweig and his wife committed suicide in 1942.

## **12 Capek, Karel (1890-1938)**

Czech novelist, dramatist, journalist and translator. Capek was the most popular writer of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1939) and defended the democratic and humanistic ideals of its founder, President T. G. Masaryk the literary outcome of which was the book *President Masaryk Tells His Story* (1928). Capek gained international reputation with his science fiction drama *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*, 1921) which was the first to introduce the word robot to the language. He blended science fiction with his firmly held anti-totalitarian beliefs in his late drama *Power and Glory* (1938) and the satirical novel *The War with the Newts* (1937). Frequently in contact with leading European intellectuals, Capek acted as a kind of official representative of the interwar republic and also influenced the development of Czech poetry. The Munich Pact of 1938 and, in particular, the subsequent witch-hunt against him, came as a great shock to Capek, one from which he never recovered.

## **13 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.

## **14 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.

## **15 Exclusion of Jews from schools in the Protectorate**

The Ministry of Education of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia sent round a ministerial decree in 1940, which stated that from school year 1940/41 Jewish pupils were not allowed to visit Czech public and private schools and those who were already in school should be excluded. After

1942 Jews were not allowed to visit Jewish schools or courses organized by the Jewish communities either.

## **16 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.

## **17 Lodz Ghetto**

It was set up in February 1940 city in the former Jewish quarter on the northern outskirts of the city. 164,000 Jews from Lodz were packed together in a 4 sq. km. area. In 1941 and 1942, 38,500 more Jews were deported to the ghetto. In November 1941, 5,000 Roma were also deported to the ghetto from Burgenland province, Austria. The Jewish self- government, led by Mordechai Rumkowski, sought to make the ghetto as productive as possible and to put as many inmates to work as he could. But not even this could prevent overcrowding and hunger or improve the inhuman living conditions. As a result of epidemics, shortages of fuel and food and insufficient sanitary conditions, about 43,500 people (21% of all the residents of the ghetto) died of undernourishment, cold and illness. The others were transported to death camps; only a very small number of them survived.

## **18 Benes, Edvard (1884-1948)**

Czechoslovak politician and president from 1935-38 and 1946-48. He was a follower of T. G. Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, and the idea of Czechoslovakism, and later Masaryk's right-hand man. After World War I he represented Czechoslovakia at the Paris Peace Conference. He was Foreign Minister (1918-1935) and Prime Minister (1921-1922) of the new Czechoslovak state and became president after Masaryk retired in 1935. The Czechoslovak alliance with France and the creation of the Little Entente (Czechoslovak, Romanian and Yugoslav alliance against Hungarian revisionism and the restoration of the Habsburgs) were essentially his work. After the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia by the Munich Pact (1938) he resigned and went into exile. Returning to Prague in 1945, he was confirmed in office and was reelected president in 1946. After the communist coup in February 1948 he resigned in June on the grounds of illness, refusing to sign the new constitution.

## **19 February 1948**

Communist take-over in Czechoslovakia. The 'people's democracy' became one of the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe. The state apparatus was centralized under the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSC). In the economy private ownership was banned and

submitted to central planning. The state took control of the educational system, too. Political opposition and dissident elements were persecuted.

## **20 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.

## **21 Prague Spring**

The term Prague Spring designates the liberalization period in communist-ruled Czechoslovakia between 1967-1969. In 1967 Alexander Dubcek became the head of the Czech Communist Party and promoted ideas of 'socialism with a human face', i.e. with more personal freedom and freedom of the press, and the rehabilitation of victims of Stalinism. In August 1968 Soviet troops, along with contingents from Poland, East Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria, occupied Prague and put an end to the reforms.

## **22 Certificate under Article 255/1946 Coll**

: Certificate awarded to certain people involved in the national struggle for liberation during World War II. It was issued by the Ministry of Defense and entailed certain advantages, such as early retirement.

## **23 Doctors' Plot**

The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the Party, the Pravda, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.

## **24 Slansky, Rudolf (1901-1952)**

Czech politician, member of the Communist Party from 1921 and Secretary-General of the Czechoslovak Communist Party from 1945-1951. After World War II he was one of the leaders of the totalitarian regime. Arrested on false charges he was sentenced to death in the so-called Slansky trial in November 1952 and hanged.

## **25 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. [26](#) Radio Free Europe: Radio station launched in 1949 at the instigation of the US government with headquarters in West Germany. The radio broadcast uncensored news and features, produced by Central and Eastern European émigrés, from Munich to countries of the Soviet block. The radio station was jammed behind the Iron Curtain, team members were constantly harassed and several people were killed in terrorist attacks by the KGB. Radio Free Europe played a role in supporting dissident groups, inner resistance and will of freedom in the Eastern and Central European communist countries and thus it contributed to the downfall of the totalitarian regimes of the Soviet block. The headquarters of the radio have been in Prague since 1994.