

Pavel Sendrei

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Subotica

Serbia

Interviewer: Klara Azulaj

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Growing up

My name is Pavel Sendrei. I was born on August 18, 1922 in Zilina (Czechoslovakia). My father, Aleksandar Sendrei, was born on August 28, 1888 in Krivosud Bodovska, Slovakia. He was killed on March 15, 1945 in the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen. My mother, Adolfinia Sendrei (maiden name - Holzmann) was born on October 31, 1893 in Stari Bistira, and she died on December 2, 1981 in Subotica.

I grew up in a middle class Neolog Jewish family. We did not go to synagogue everyday, but we observed the big holidays. We lived in a rented apartment. Hungarian was my mother tongue, because my father had finished his studies at the university in Budapest and my mother went to a Hungarian school during the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. I had a governess who taught me German. I only began to learn Slovakian when I started the first grade of primary school. After elementary school I enrolled in a secondary school. I didn't have any problems with Slovakian. I graduated on May 25, 1939.

As a young boy I was a member of the Makabi where we practiced gymnastics and athletics and which was part of the Zionist society Makabi Hazair. The members of this organization went on picnics, and camping trips where we were taught dances, songs, Hebrew language and history. In 1937 I participated in the Makabiada in Zilina and every year I went to the Makabi Hazair camp. After 1940 this was interrupted because of the German occupation of Slovakia.

Zilina had about 25,000 residents of which about 6,000 were Jews. One of the deputy mayors was a Jew. During the war Zilina was a big camp. It was a gathering camp where people were put into wagons and transported to other camps.

My father, Aleksandar Sendrei, spent all day in his drugstore. He was a big fan of football. He was a member of the ESKA ZILINA football club and

one of its big donors. This football club was once one of the leaders in Slovakia. My mother, Adolfina Sendrei, was a classical housewife. She made really tasty meals, but her cuisine was not kosher.

I do not remember either my maternal or paternal grandfathers, as they died when I was quite small. I met my grandmothers, but I do not remember them too clearly because they had both died around 1930.

My family gathered around my grandmother's sister Hermina Glazel. She was a housewife, very communicative and always willing to make the best reception for her guests. She was in fact the head of our family. She had two married daughters in Zilina. Hermina had a big house with a huge garden in which there were all kinds of fruits. All of our relatives would gather here during the summers. We loved gathering in her garden in the summer time. In the shade of the trees we used to drink cold drinks and talk about everything. Those were moments of real relaxation.

I socialized exclusively with Jewish children. In my class in school there were about 40 children, 11 of which were Jews. I was happy that there were no arguments in my class between the Jewish pupils and the others. We spent seven years together and were good friends all that time. My best friend, Kornil Verthajn, and I sat on the same bench. We went together to the Makabi Hazair. Kornil was deported together with his parents and returned, but his parents did not survive the Holocaust. After the war I helped him make aliyah from Czechoslovakia through Yugoslavia.

During the war

I remember that in school every week we had lessons with Rabbi Dr. Fridman. He taught Hebrew language and the history of the Jewish people. After graduation I worked in the drugstore until its "aryanization." Then I got fired, and like many Jewish children, I attended an agricultural course in the Jewish community. The course took place on rented agricultural property. We cultivated the land ourselves, and sold everything that grew, and that is how we survived. This lasted about a year. On that farm, we worked for a living, but it wasn't in preparation for aliyah to Israel, only for survival.

During that time my father, Aleksandar Sendrei, as a former member of the social democratic party was imprisoned. My father wasn't an active member of that party. He had a very good friend, who was a secretary in the social democratic party and he persuaded my father not to register for the party. So, my father was more like a passive member. From prison he was taken to a concentration camp where he remained until the Slovakian uprising in 1944, when he was liberated. After that he joined the partisans, but quickly in one of the actions he fell into the hands of the Germans and was deported to Bergen Belsen where he died on March 15, 1945

of typhus.

I was taken into forced labor until September 20, 1944. Then I saw Jews being taken to the train station for deportation, and I decided to go into hiding. My mother refused to go with me because she wanted to live in her apartment and wait for father to come home. However, in October 1944 she was taken to Auschwitz and from there she was taken to a factory where they made parts for airplanes in Sakis-bat-kudove, and from where she was liberated on May 8, 1945. (Editor's note: Sakis-bat-kudove was in Germany, 5 kilometers from the border with the Czech Republic; the nearest town to it was Nachod.)

Post-war

Immediately after liberation, I was employed at the repatriation office in Bratislava. The Jewish community in Bratislava had started its work, and I was informed that the repatriation office needed employees. Thanks to the fact that I speak several languages, Hungarian, German, Slovakian and Czech, I was engaged in April 1945. The office belonged to the Czech Office of Internal Affairs. I met my wife, Judita Bruck, and her family while I was working in Bratislava. They went from the Strashov camp to a work camp in Austria, where they were held until the war ended. They went to Bratislava on foot and in a wagon and they ended up in the repatriation office where I worked.

I liked Judita immediately, and because she was hungry most of the time, whenever I could I took her to restaurants, sometimes three times a day. Wishing to do something in return, Judita's father Matija invited me to visit the family in Subotica (Yugoslavia). When I could, I accepted his invitation and visited them in 1946. The love between Judita and me was mutual, and we agreed to get married. We married in May 1947 and went to Czechoslovakia. On April 24, 1949 Sonja, our daughter, was born.

After the war I worked for a short period in a drugstore, but when it was nationalized I got work as a photoreporter in Czech TANJUG. I worked there until the "Slansky trial." In Czechoslovakia antisemitism was reestablished, and because of that I and another seventy Jews were expelled from our jobs. In 1950 I was a member of the three-member presidency of the Jewish community of Zilina. In 1956 the Jewish community received an invitation to a reception with the Israeli ambassador in Prague. I went with my wife Judita. We were the only members of the entire Jewish community in Czechoslovakia who accepted the invitation, the rest were too scared of the communists to go.

At the reception I met the secretary of the embassy who made aliyah from Czechoslovakia in 1938 and whom I knew from our days back in Makabi. He told us that the JOINT was helping as much as it could old Jews who had

survived the Holocaust, but that it was not something that was going through the Jewish community rather through individuals who were willing to help. Judita and I accepted this work and we worked until the end of March 1959 when we were arrested by the Czech government for allegedly "spying." Later, we were accused of undermining the Republic of Czechoslovakia because the JOINT were sending the money anonymously to survivors of the Holocaust. Judita was imprisoned from March 29, 1957 to November 29, 1957 and I was incarcerated from March 29, 1957 until March 29, 1959.

After fulfilling my sentence, I could not find work and life was very hard. Finally, we packed our things took our daughter, Sonja, and in October 1962 we moved to Subotica, Yugoslavia where we live today.

In Subotica I was employed in the "Slavica" cosmetic factory where I worked for a year. After that I was employed at the "Sever" electro-motor factory as an export representative. I worked there for ten years. From 1974-1984 I worked as the head of international transport in "Dinamo trans." I retired in 1984 with 43 years and 12 days of work experience. All during this time I was very active in the Jewish community. From 1992-1993 I was secretary of the community. And now, my wife, Judita, and I enjoy going to the community to celebrate the holidays and to participate in cultural events.