

Oto Wagner



This is a photo of me, Oto Wagner, as a young man, right before the beginning of the World War II. The photograph was taken in one of the photo studios that existed in Bratislava at the time.

I was quite sports-oriented. Eventually I was even the junior champion of Czechoslovakia in swimming.

Well, and now too, now that I'm older, a championship in swimming for "veteran" swimmers was held. I entered and won in the breaststroke and the crawl. So I'm the senior champion of Slovakia in swimming. I swam a lot since childhood. I'd say I was about seven when I started. I used to go swimming to Grössling. Professor Stahl used to train me. At first I was a member of Bar Kochba, which was a Jewish club. In time I transferred over to the Slovak swim team. There, non-Jews trained me. I trained hard, until I became junior champion of Czechoslovakia. I like to recall those times. There were no comments made about me in the team or amongst the swimmers, that I'm a Jew and so on. Maybe they didn't even know it, I didn't tell anyone about it. I had a German name, so I didn't differ in that either. Before the war, there were a lot of Germans and Hungarians living in Bratislava. My thick blond hair didn't give a Jewish impression either.

Our family was relatively progressive, despite the fact that our father was a supporter of Orthodoxy. We were rather left-wing. My father wasn't in any political party, though. He was a member of the Jewish religious community. He normally paid membership dues and so on. I don't remember him having some sort of important function there, and if he did do something, it was certainly just something small, unimportant. I was also a shomer [a member of the Hashomer Hatzair movement], but then it fell apart, as the guys moved away to Israel. I didn't do hachsharah.

My classmates were all Jews. We spent our free time normally, like all children back then. We played soccer, there where Slovak Radio is today. We used to go on hikes together regularly. We'd go to see movies and so on. And what was the best, we used to just sit around and look at pretty girls. We used to go on trips around Slovakia, but mostly we just hiked around the outskirts of Bratislava. Raca [Raca, today a city ward of Bratislava – Editor's note] was already far for us, that was already the countryside. So when we went on an all-day outing, we'd go let's say to Karlova Ves [Karlova Ves, today a city ward of Bratislava – Editor's note], and that was our all-day outing. Mostly we used to walk, or go on bikes. We used to go on vacations with our parents, to visit their siblings. We had family in Vienna, as well as in Budapest. We'd go there occasionally. But we didn't go on vacations as such. We didn't do things like going to the seaside, for example. Back then people didn't know the concept of a recreational vacation. It wasn't as widespread as it is now. In the end, my parents weren't that well off financially that we could've afforded to go on vacation to the seaside. We were more or less middle-class. We weren't badly off, but didn't have extra money.