

# Oto Wagner

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Bratislava

Slovak Republic

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Mr. Oto Wagner was born in Bratislava, and has lived in his hometown all his life – just like his parents and grandparents. At the age of 85, this gentleman lives a very active life. He devotes himself to various cultural, educational and edifying activities. His effort is that the important events of the 20th Century, like the Slovak National Uprising [1](#) or the tragedy of the Holocaust not be forgotten. And he of course wishes that similar terrible deeds and atrocities would never be repeated. This is also one of the reasons why he shared his life story with us.



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## My family background

My paternal grandfather's name was Samuel Wagner. He was a native of Bratislava, and had a pub in Zidovska [Jewish] Street. My grandmother was a housewife; I don't remember her name. Like my grandfather, my grandmother was also from Bratislava. Thus my father was also from Bratislava, and I was also born in Bratislava. My wife was also born in Bratislava. So all the members of our family are true Bratislava natives. My grandparents dressed normally for the times. He didn't wear payes, but my grandfather Samuel didn't take more than two steps without having a hat on his head. His wife wore a wig [2](#).

My mother's name was Serena Wagnerova, née Polakova. She was the daughter of Zigmund and Klara Polak. My mother's parents also lived here in Bratislava. I don't remember them much. I know that my grandmother was a housewife. I don't know what her maiden name was. My grandfather Zigmund was a door-to-door salesman. He sold various goods. Alas, I don't know any more about these grandparents of mine.

My paternal grandparents were Orthodox Jews [3](#). Especially my grandfather was very devout. We had to attend synagogue regularly. We went and prayed every Friday and Saturday. My

grandfather, as well as my father [Jozef Wagner], if I remember correctly, had a place reserved in the synagogue up in Kapucinska Street in Bratislava. Alas, that synagogue has since been demolished. My mother would also always pray in the evening. Basically they raised my brother [Alfred Wagner] and me in an Orthodox environment. But already in my youth I had broken free of that Orthodox Judaism. I was modern, and one could say sometimes also a "semi-atheist".

My grandparents, the Wagners, initially lived in Kapucinska Street. Later they moved to where the Hotel Tatra now stands. Back then there were old buildings there. I don't remember exactly anymore how it was furnished there, but their furnishings didn't differ in any way from other apartments of the time.

My mother had three siblings, three brothers. I don't know anymore in what order they were born. Alfred and Zigmund perished in Auschwitz during the Holocaust. The third was named Ignac and lived in Budapest, while Alfred lived in Vienna. I don't know much about them, I don't remember them. My father had two siblings, his sister Gizela and his brother Leo. Gizela's was married to a man named Wagmann, and they made a living as merchants. They owned and together ran a clothes store.

My parents met at some Jewish ball. For two years they were friends and saw each other. Then they finally ended up getting married. They were married in 1918, in Bratislava, in the courtyard of the Orthodox synagogue in Kapucinska St. My father had a two-year business diploma. That is, he had people's schools, council schools and a two-year business school. My mother attended five years of people's school and four years of council school [4](#).

I had one brother. His name was Alfred Wagner. He was four years older than I. He was born in 1920. Alfred was a high school graduate. After graduation, he apprenticed at a clothing store. The clothing store where he began was named Büchler. It was a large store that sold clothes, carpets, and similar goods. Alas, he fell in the Slovak National Uprising. He was a salesman at Büchler. He worked as a salesman at a carpet store. And then, during World War II, he joined the Slovak National Uprising, and I've already mentioned, he died in the uprising.

## **Growing up**

My parents had me in 1924, as their second and also their last child. Like all the members of our family, I was born in Bratislava. My parents named me Oto Wagner. At home we spoke German, especially my grandparents. They also knew Yiddish. That was still the old generation. Then with our parents, we also spoke German, but they also knew how to speak Slovak well. I consider my mother tongue to be Slovak. In prewar Bratislava, hearing Slovak, German or Hungarian in the street was an everyday occurrence. Communicating in these languages wasn't a problem either. Our family was no exception.

When I lived with my parents, the first place we lived was on what was then called Hodzovo Namesti [Hodza Square]. Now it's all changed, the old buildings have long been torn down and demolished. It's all more modern there now. Then we moved to Metropolka, where the state hospital is now. Across from this hospital is this tall building, with a café upstairs and a bank in the front. That's the building where we lived. In Metropolka, we had an apartment up on the third floor. My parents, brother and I lived together there until 1936. The apartment had three rooms, and was nicely and tastefully furnished. The furniture was partly old and partly also modern. In the

beginning we had household help. There was one so-called maid, who cooked, cleaned, and so on. But that was only in the beginning. Later my mother did everything. She took on all the work in the household. I'd say that we had mostly Jewish neighbors. Beside us, for example, lived Professor König, who taught at a Jewish business school. Then there was one doctor that lived there; I don't remember his name any more. In all, about 80% of the families might have been Jewish. We always got along well, and were friends. So while I lived with my parents, I mostly met only fellow Jews, because there were only Jews around me, whether at school, in the street in front of the building, or when we'd go to the synagogue. Everywhere I met up mainly with Jews.

At home we primarily bought German newspapers, and then also what we'd get from the Jewish Community. We also had a collection of books, but it didn't contain anything special. My mother always read mostly things of general interest, newspapers, magazines and so on.

Up to ten thousand Jews lived in prewar Bratislava. Back then, the city had a population of about 100,000, and of that one could say 10% was made up of Jews. Jews always got along well amongst themselves. Here in Bratislava there were synagogues in Hejdukova and Kapucinska Street, and a Neolog one on Rybne Namesti [Fish Square]. Alas, after the war they demolished that beautiful building on Rybne Namesti along with the synagogue on Kapucinska St. There were of course also many prayer halls here. A lot of these, what now one could say were cultural landmarks, are unfortunately no longer standing. Synagogues and prayer halls were demolished, whether because of World War II or modernization of the city. While we're on the subject of synagogues and prayer halls, religion comes to mind. I had my bar mitzvah [bar mitzvah - "son of the Commandments", a Jewish boy that has reached the age of thirteen. A ceremony, during which the boy is declared to be bar mitzvah, from this point on he must fulfil all commandments of the Torah – Editor's note] as a thirteen-year-old boy in that synagogue on Rybne Namesti. It was a very nice experience. When they called me to the Torah, I went up and read in Hebrew. All in all, it was truly pleasant and nice. I probably got money as gifts for this ceremony. We then had a celebration at home. The whole family came.

My father prayed every morning, and I had to pray with him. He didn't make a move without a cap. We strictly observed Friday and Saturday. This always upset me. The other boys would go play soccer, and we'd go to the synagogue. My brother and I had to go there no matter what, whether it was summer or winter. To sit there and pray. We conformed of course, as we wanted to obey our parents. My brother and I weren't really that devout, we were just listening to our parents. If we had had our way, we would've preferred to play soccer. We couldn't even light a lamp [Sabbath: during the Sabbath, 39 main work activities are forbidden, upon which injunctions on others are based. "The lighting of lights" belongs among forbidden activities – Editor's note].

My Mom led a kosher household [5](#). No ham, no pork, nothing like that. We kept strict kosher. On Friday, Mom would prepare shoulet. She'd boil beans and I had to run with a full pot, to Obchodna Street, to the baker. The baker's name was Heller. Every Friday I arrived there with a pot of shoulet, and on Saturday I had to pick it up for lunch. Mom made it mainly with goose meat. For the Sabbath, we also had barches. Our mom took care of everything around food preparation.

We observed all the High Holidays. For Yom Kippur [Yom Kippur: The Day of Atonement. The most celebrated event in the Jewish calendar. The day of "cleansing of sins". Fasting is observed. – Editor's note] we strictly fasted. We also celebrated Sukkot. We didn't have our own sukkah, but we

used to go to our neighbors' [Sukkot: Festival of Booths. A festive atmosphere reigns during the whole week that the holidays lasts, where the most important is to be in the sukkah – Editor's note]. Beside us lived a man who sold beef cattle. He'd build a sukkah in the courtyard, and several families would gather there. It was an enclosed courtyard. No one besides us had access to it. There was a large steel gate there, which separated us from the world around us.

When I was still little, I attended nursery school at what was then Obchodna St, No. 21. It was of course a Jewish nursery school. Then my parents registered me in school. I absolved five grades of people's school at a Jewish school in Zochova St. Then I had three years of council school and in fourth year I transferred to a state school at Na Palisadoch. There I finished fourth year of council school. I didn't get any further education before the outbreak of World War II. I didn't do that until after, when I returned from the concentration camp. I took correspondence courses for my high school diploma and university. I remember one very good professor from school, who taught us mathematics. His name was König. Religion was of course very much emphasized at school. Physical education and singing were among my favorite subjects. 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 [6](#), 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, see [7](#)], but then it fell apart, as the guys moved away to Israel. I didn't do hachsharah [8](#). 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.

### **During the war**

In 1939 our father had to give up his clothing store [9](#). After that he was unemployed. My father's sister Gizela and her husband, who had a store, then supported us financially, and helped us however they could. In 1939 I was 16 years old. I'd finished fourth year of council school, and couldn't find a job. So I worked as a helper in Richard Weinhandel's clothing store. I helped out there, and earned a few crowns. Then I went to help build a war memorial, and for that I earned ten crowns in one night [The value of one Slovak crown during the era of the Slovak State (1939 – 1945) was equal to 31.21 mg of pure gold. The rate of exchange of the German mark to the Slovak crown was artificially set at 1:11 – Editor's note]. In this fashion I managed to muddle through. I earned money here and there, wherever I could. Finally, in that year of 1941, they dragged both my parents away from Bratislava to Zilina, to a collection camp. They came to our place and told them to pack up and bring only the bare necessities. They were supposed to report in Zilina.

Luckily I had a friend, Ludovit Krajcovic was his name, who was from the town of Bamon. He lent me his papers, so I then lived in Bratislava as Ludovit Krajcovic, on Aryan papers. So my parents left for Zilina. From Zilina, in April 1942, they dragged them off to Auschwitz, where they also died. My brother was also living in Bratislava, on Aryan papers. They caught him, and then he was in the Novaky labor camp [10](#). During one check someone recognized me as well, or someone informed on me. So from 1942 until the start of the Slovak National Uprising, I was in the Novaky labor camp. From there I went to the uprising along with my brother and other boys, and joined the partisans.

The Novaky labor camp was a relatively modern labor camp. Jews worked in workshops there, and manufactured various products. I myself didn't have any particular job. I was a manual laborer. When they needed to dig a ditch, I dug a ditch; when something else was needed, I did it. I was in Novaky together with my brother, and we also joined the uprising together. Those that obeyed the camp rules were relatively well off. The food wasn't the worst, and we built a swimming pool and had swimming races. There were various cultural events there, movies, theater and so on. You just couldn't leave, because if they caught you, you were given worse living conditions. I made long-term friendships with my fellow inmates in Novaky. For example, I still get together with Bachnar to this day. Plus I've gotten together with Kamenciky, with Fero Chorvat, Steiner, plus many others who also lived in Bratislava afterwards. I'd say that there wasn't any great tyranny in Novaky, or drilling. Those that were obedient and did what they were told and worked like they were supposed to, and followed the rules there were left to live in peace.

On August 29, 1944, the Slovak National Uprising broke out, and young Jewish guys from Novaky and from Sered [11](#) joined together and volunteered for the uprising. In Novaky there was also something along the lines of illegal gunrunning, but I wasn't involved. I knew about it, but wasn't directly involved. But I do know that they used to get guns for people. After leaving Novaky, we got a crash battle course in Kostolany, because some of us hadn't ever in their life held a weapon in their hands.

I was 19, and so I got a gun; they showed me how to use a submachine gun, a machine gun, and I got a couple of grenades and they sent us to Batovany. The German army was approaching, and we were supposed to hold the positions there. A very strong German army, fresh reinforcements



from Bratislava, and many of the partisans ran away from there, or returned to the villages they'd come from. The Jewish guys who'd arrived there didn't have any home. They had no place to run away to. So it's fair to say that 80% of those that fell at Batovany were Jewish. They held their positions. Gradually we retreated all the way back to Banska Bystrica.

When the Germans occupied Banska Bystrica, we retreated into the mountains. I was the commander of a recon unit in the Jegorov-Stalin 9th Battalion. My group had between five and ten guys. We then retreated along with the entire brigade up to Prasiva. From there we organized ambushes and sabotage; we'd blow up railway tracks, and attack certain villages, where we knew there was a weak German or Guardist garrison [12](#). In December 1944, a commando unit of the Hlinka Guard surrounded us during one attack. There were five of us, and our task was to find out where the Germans were, and beg for food from the villagers. But we were captured. Those that tried to escape were shot. The rest were captured. I had the luck that there were also some German soldiers among them, but they were Austrian soldiers, from Vienna. Because I was able to communicate with them perfectly, and I spoke with an Austrian accent, the Guardists and those German soldiers decided to not hand us over to the SS, as they'd have shot us on the spot.

They handed us over to Slovak authorities. Just then there was one transport to Bratislava ready to go. So we went on this transport in January 1945 to Bratislava, to the regional court jail. From Dolna Lhota, by Brezna, or from someplace around there, we went by transport to Bratislava, to the regional court jail, where there were political prisoners, partisans and illegals. We were jailed there up until February 1945. During February, the Gestapo took over the jail. They transferred those of us that were there, around 280 of us, to a jail on the third floor, for political prisoners and enemies of the state, and the other prisoners, criminals, were on the ground floor and on the first and second floors.

We were on the third floor until 19th February 1945, when at 5:00 a.m. they prepared a transport, five German trucks covered with canvas. We had to get onto these trucks. In each truck there were around 50 prisoners plus two SS soldiers in the back with submachine guns. In this way, on 19th February 1945, they took us to the Mauthausen concentration camp [13](#). We passed through Vienna, and when we were in Melk, about 80 km from Vienna, an air-raid alarm sounded. The leader of the convoy of trucks didn't react to the alert, and didn't give orders for the trucks to stop. We kept going. The English-American fighters, thinking that it was a German transport, as they were German trucks covered in canvas, began attacking us. At that point the trucks stopped.

The SS jumped into the ditches and took cover. We of course also wanted to jump out, but they were shouting "Zürück oder schiesse" – back, or I'll shoot. So we had to climb back on those trucks and I could already see the fighters approaching our trucks. So I hit the deck of the truck along with the rest of the others. At that moment they began firing. Five times they repeated that horrible barrage. Four trucks were partly demolished. Luckily, I wasn't wounded. In the meantime, Germans from Melk had arrived. There was a concentration camp in Melk too [Melk: a subsidiary camp of the Mauthausen concentration camp – Editor's note]. Those who were only lightly wounded, or not at all, had to load the dead or seriously wounded onto trucks. They took the wounded and dead to Melk, and later we found out that they'd shut them up into one room there, and let them bleed to death. Those of us that had remained alive, or were only lightly wounded, were dragged off to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Upper Austria. We were in Mauthausen until 5th May 1945, when we were freed by the American army. Mauthausen was the second worst camp after

Auschwitz.

In Mauthausen we slept fifty, sixty to a barrack, either on the ground or on bunks. There were lots of these barracks there. The barracks are still standing today. Every year, I organize bus tours to Mauthausen. We had to sleep on those beds, the bunks, covered only with thin blankets, and we didn't have any pillows. It was all stuffed with grass and whatever. The way it worked was that every morning at 5:00 a.m., they'd chase us out onto the assembly grounds. When we arrived in Mauthausen, it was 19th February 1945, still winter. Ten, fifteen degrees below freezing, and we had to strip naked in some room. They shaved us bald and gave us striped clothing and thin cloth slippers. They then chased us outside, and from morning, from 5:00 a.m., until 5:00 p.m., we stood outside on the assembly grounds. Those that were packed into the middle, survived. Those on the edges, those got chilled through... Many of us also got diarrhea, which was certain death. At 5:00 p.m. they herded us back into the barracks. Food consisted of a half-liter of soup, water in which potato peels had been boiled, and a eighth of a loaf of bread.

Upon our arrival at Mauthausen, we saw emaciated prisoners, Russian soldiers and so on. For the first two days, we didn't know what it was all about. For example people, civilians, who lived in the town of Mauthausen, didn't know at all what was going on in the concentration camp. I found that out from them afterwards. For example, one nice day at 5:00 a.m., they led us out onto the assembly grounds. There was a terrible stink. Then we found out that they'd shot and burned the Russians during the night. Then we again stood outside all day and froze. I was young and healthy, and always tried to get inside the mass of people, so I wouldn't be on the edges of the crowd. Those that were on the edges of the crowd usually didn't return.

I had the luck to run into a person I knew in Mauthausen. He wasn't a Jew. He was a Czech Communist, and was in Mauthausen for being a Communist. He'd already been there for some two years perhaps, and had gotten into the office. Well, and he'd always give us a bit of food or something. We were in the concentration camp until May 5th [1945], when the American army freed us.

## **After the war**

My life was saved three times during the war. The first time was when the Guardists and Germans caught us, that they didn't drag me off and shoot me. The second time was when I survived that air raid, where the Anglo-Americans were shooting at us thinking it was a German transport. The third time was a few days before the liberation of the Mauthausen camp, before 5th May 1945, when I came down with typhoid fever, which was certain death. And because it was a few days before the liberation, the Americans then sent me to a hospital, where they cured me. So three times my life was saved in this miraculous fashion.

At the hospital, they treated me very well and nicely. The doctors and nurses were German, but under American supervision. I knew German, so I was able to speak to them. They were very nice. And those people, the villagers, they knew about the concentration camps, but then didn't have the faintest idea what sort of atrocities were going on there. Mass murders and gassings, they didn't know about that. All they knew was that there were prisoners there, and that they were starving. That's all. I know that, because I spoke with the residents of the surrounding towns and villages, and they swore to me that they didn't know about murders in the gas chambers and similar things.

I arrived in Bratislava from the hospital in August 1945. I of course came home, and didn't find anyone. Be it my father, my mother, my brother, my uncles, all had been murdered. No one was there. I arrived in Bratislava as a complete stranger. My parents had left the apartment, and that was that. After us, someone Aryanized it. I was young, and didn't make any claims on it. What was important to me was that I'd survived. After the war, I of course was inclined towards Jews. I didn't have any other friends except for Jews. It was almost only always we Jews, who'd been together with in Novaky, or in the uprising, that would get together. We met in cafés and so on. Nothing but Jews.

I began living in a place I rented from some non-Jews. I rented for five years, from 1945 until 1950. I began taking high school correspondence courses, because I was working as a helper, a laborer. After graduating from high school, I got a job and worked in a communal company and in various organizations, and then worked my way up. I began taking economics university via correspondence. I graduated and became a commercial engineer. I didn't experience any anti-Semitic comments at work, nothing like that took place. After the Slansky trials [14](#) I had certain doubts about the regime, but otherwise I myself didn't have any problems, as I wasn't in a position of responsibility. I worked as a minor official, so I didn't feel anything like some sort of pressure. It didn't affect me in any way.

I was a member of the Party [15](#), and acted accordingly. The reason I was in the Communist Party was mainly because both my son and daughter have a university education, and it was very hard to get them into university. But when I was in the Party, they got it more easily. So at least because of the kids, I was a rank-and-file member. I worked for a communal company as a minor official. I took care of "new forms of work" and socialist competition. And then I transferred to the Slovak Geodetics and Cartography Union. I worked as an clerk, and then worked my way up to manager of the general accounting department.

Most of the people at my work didn't know that I was Jewish. I didn't make it apparent, like saying that I was a Jew and so on. I worked as the manager of the expenses section, and tried to do my work responsibly and as well as possible. I had very good contacts with the directors. I got along very well with them. They valued my work, so I didn't have any problems at work. I didn't have any problems due to my origin either. I've got this nature, as they say, that I get along with everyone. I get along well with everyone, I like to laugh, I like to crack jokes, and so on. So I can say that I was well liked by my co-workers. I tried to make by subordinates' work easier, and improve their pay. We had good bonuses and compensation. I had five people under me, and when there was less work, I let them go home early, for example.

A few years after the war ended, one very lucky thing happened to me. I was at a partisan dance, as a former partisan, and there met my current wife. She, like her father, had been an anti-Fascist. My father-in-law was an upholsterer, and during the Holocaust he hid two Jewish families in the back in his warehouse, who'd also survived. My wife isn't Jewish. Simply put, I fell in love at that dance. My wife's maiden name was Lujza Nagyova. She's also from Bratislava, like me, and was born in 1928. She worked for her parents. Her father, as I've already mentioned, was an upholsterer. My wife's mother was a housewife. My mother took care of all the administrative work in the upholstery workshop. She didn't have any siblings; she was an only child. My wife graduated from business high school.



We didn't have a Jewish wedding; we had a normal wedding, at city hall, on 27th May 1950. We got married, and we've been married for over 50 years now. After the wedding we lived with her parents in Lodna Street. My wife's parents welcomed me as a son. My friends and acquaintances that had been in Novaky with me said about my wife's father: "He's an excellent person, he supported us. He supported us financially in everything, that's one excellent person." He had an amazing relationship with Jews.

My wife didn't care that I met only with Jewish friends. She was raised to believe that all people were equal. Her father had been a member of the Communist Party since 1936. And he had a very good attitude towards Jews. He had very many Jewish friends. So he also had a lot of Jewish customers. When I got married, he immediately automatically said: "Why would you live in a sublet?!" You'll live with us." They had a five-room apartment, so of course right away my wife and I had one room to ourselves.

After finishing university, I already had a relatively good job. I worked as the manager of the general accounting department of the Cartography and Geodetics Institute in Bratislava. Then I worked as the manager of the economics division. In 1950 Dr. Gerej, the head of communal companies, issued me a two-room apartment in Laurinska St. My wife and I moved in and lived comfortably there. Later we traded that apartment for a three-room one in Spitalska St. My wife and I lived there until the 1990s. Then we traded it for our current one.

We've got two children. Our daughter Sona, and our son Petr. Sona is married. They've got two daughters, and her husband owns a company. They live in Bratislava. Our son Peter emigrated back during Communist times. He was working here in Slovakia as a physics teacher. He didn't agree with the regime, so emigrated to Austria. He became an Austrian citizen, and today lives in Vienna. He left for Austria alone, as his wife didn't want to go. But he used to send his wife and son here in Slovakia money. In the beginning he worked as a masseur. He then divorced his wife. His son lives in Bratislava. But we don't keep in touch that much. He'll come by when it's his name day, or his birthday. My children weren't raised in the Jewish spirit and traditions. Both our children graduated from university.

My wife didn't have any objections when I'd go, or now go to the synagogue, or to various Jewish events. I'm in very good contact with the leaders of the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities, concretely with Dr. Weiss, as well as with Petr Salner and many others. I get along well with them, and we understand each other. So when we have some events, we always get together and have a pleasant conversation. Now I was for example lecturing for fifty, sixty Jewish people who'd been in Terezin [16](#). I lectured on the Holocaust.

Currently I'm the vice-president of the Central Council of the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters [17](#). I'm also the president of the Association of Prisoners of the Nazi Concentration Camps Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück, Terezin, Stutthof [Sztutowo in Polish], and am the vice-president of the International Political Prisoners of Concentration Camps of 18 European countries.

Each year, we organize a bus trip to the Mauthausen concentration camp; the participants are former prisoners, their family members and sympathizers, but recently we've been taking students and history teachers, where I show them right on the spot, as a former prisoner, what concentrations camps were all about. I got this idea because various tours of Auschwitz and I don't know what else are put on. And once I was talking to a friend of mine, the poor guy died recently,

Colonel Oto Michalec was his name. He'd been there too, and he said to me: "Oto, why don't we also put together a but tour to Mauthausen, where we'll show people right on the spot, what was there, how it was?" At first we had problems, but the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities paid for the bus. In the morning, at 6:00 p.m., we left for Mauthausen and in the afternoon, around two or three, back to Bratislava. Then I promoted the whole thing, and I took out an ad in a newspaper named Bojovník [Fighter] published by the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters. I got people to sign up, and now we regularly go to Mauthausen in May, on the anniversary of the liberation.

Right after the war, in 1945, I renewed my membership in the Jewish religious community. Our children always knew about all my activities and about that I was a Jew. They live as atheists, but have a positive relationship to Jews and Jewry. Most of my daughter's girlfriends are even Jewish. Our children are just aware that their father is a Jew, and that they're from a Jewish family.

I retired in 1986. I was 60. At one time I was still working as a retiree, part-time, in cartography. I still have my positions in the various unions. I'm the vice-president of the Central Council of the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters. I've been active in this union since 1945. I got in as a former concentration camp prisoner, and a partisan. The entire union represents former resistance fighters, illegal workers, anti-Fascists and their sympathizers. I've been vice-president for 8 years now. That was a matter of course, that my path led to this union, which fights against neo-Nazism, against Fascism. I was always active. At first I was the head of one group. Then I was secretary, then president of the western organization, so I then worked my way up to the position of vice-president of the Central Council. My work in the union entails representing the president in his absence, and I also take care of the entire agenda in cooperation with foreign resistance members in the surrounding countries. I also verify requests for compensation and so on. While we're on the subject of compensation, I also received compensation. I got 15,000 marks from Germany, then I got 40,000 crowns for my participation in the resistance, and finally 117,000 for the uprising, and for having been in a concentration camp [18](#). That was from the Slovak government.

As far as religious life in the community is concerned, when they invite me I go, but I don't go to synagogue regularly. I only go when there's some sort of a holiday, remembrance of the dead for example. In my free time, I get together with both Jews and non-Jews. The Jews are relatively few. If people are reputable, I don't distinguish between Jew and Gentile. I take with reserve those people who I know have a negative attitude towards questions of Jews or the uprising. Because there are also those that say that the uprising was a tragedy for the Slovak nation. But as long as a person is decent, I don't care if he's a Jew or not. That's a principle of mine. I was liked for never distinguishing whether someone was a Jew, a Catholic or a Protestant. I always took people as being in the first place human beings. But I'll discuss things with those that don't have a positive attitude towards Jews. I'll either change their mind, or I won't discuss it with them any longer. I'll tell you honestly, the people I meet, they respect me, and I them. For one, they know that I was in a concentration camp, that I was in the uprising, I was in a labor camp, and that I hold high positions. I've got all sorts of foreign awards. I was in Moscow for example, where I met Putin, and so on.

I've got a couple of awards for my lifelong successes and resolve to achieve something. The last time was on 1st January 2006, on the occasion of the national holiday celebrating the creation of the Slovak Republic. Ivan Gasparovic [19](#), our president, gave me the Milan Rastislav Stefanik Cross

[The Milan Rastislav Stefanik Cross is awarded to citizens of the Slovak Republic who have risked their lives to defend the Slovak Republic and save human lives or significant material values. It is awarded by the president of the Slovak Republic upon nomination by the government. It was awarded to General-Major Oto Wagner in 2006 – Editor's note]. It's a state award of the order of Milan Rastislav Stefanik for merit and saving human lives while risking one's own. The Central Council of the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters nominated me for it. I value equally an award from Austria, from the president of the Austrian Republic. It's an award for merit for the Austrian Republic, which I was given at the Austrian embassy, commissioned by the president of Austria.

We, the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters, used to have a very good relationship with the Communists. Now, when the government is oriented towards the right, and groups itself mostly with rightists, that relationship is not as ideal [during 1998 – 2006 (thus also during the time of this interview), a right-wing government was in power in Slovakia. After the 2006 parliamentary elections, the situation changed. Currently, leftists have a parliamentary majority in the government of the Slovak Republic – Editor's note]. I attend all sorts of receptions – Chinese, Austrian, German. I meet our ministers there, we say hello, exchange a few words, but that's all. I was always oriented towards the left, and don't see it as being very rosy right now. Now I've for example found out, Janek Langos [20](#) is a friend of mine, and he told me that they've got two thousand names of former Aryanizers [Aryanization: the transfer of Jewish stores, businesses, companies, etc. to the ownership of another, non-Jewish person – the Aryanizer – Editor's note]. And I said: "Janek, but most of these people aren't alive anymore." "That doesn't matter, their children and grandchildren should know that their parents and grandparents Aryanized Jewish property." And that's supposed to be normally published like the StB records [21, 22]. I'm assuming it'll be quite unpleasant for the children and grandchildren, when they find out that their grandfather Aryanized Jewish property. I wouldn't publish it. But I don't have any influence over it. It'll just cause useless friction again.

The last few years I've been lecturing often. At one lecture, at the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities, where there were about 200 people, mostly people that had been in concentration camps as children, I said: "We can't be angry at Germans, because it's not the fault of today's generation that their fathers and grandfathers committed such horrid things." That's what I said there, and they were all Jews there. And they weren't against it. No took issue with it. You know, we can't be angry with one young German because his grandfather was, let's say, a member of the SS and murdered people. It's not the fault of today's generation. But I do think that every school should visit a concentration camp at least once, it doesn't matter which one. Let those young people see what atrocities were committed, what war, hunger and torture are.

I was invited to one school, and was asked to tell students that were going to be graduating something about the Slovak National Uprising – as a former participant and the vice-president of the Central Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters. So I organized a talk there, and gave a lecture about the Slovak National Uprising and the Holocaust. That the Slovak National Uprising has been recorded in the history of the Slovak nation with a gold pen. Because with the help of the Slovak National Uprising, Slovakia as such was included with the victorious countries, and not with the defeated Fascist countries. So I spoke about it, and when I was finished, one graduate stood up and said: "Sir, please, I have one question." I said: "Yes, what is it?" "You say that you fought in the Slovak National Uprising, that you were the head of a recon unit, and that you were wounded and

captured. You were dragged off to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Upper Austria." I said: "Yes." "So could you tell me please, what did you do in that camp all day?" This means I can't be angry with him, at that boy. They didn't study anything at all about the Holocaust and the concentration camps. They didn't know anything at all. They just knew the bare outline of the uprising, otherwise nothing. That's why I'm trying to tell this young generation what the uprising was, what the Holocaust was, and so on. So that they'll have at least some sort of a foundation. If their parents and teachers didn't tell them about it, or if they weren't interested in finding out about it, whether from books, or from magazines, I at least tell them about the past like this, orally.

Not just the Holocaust is left out of the school curriculum, but neither do they for example teach that Czechoslovakia was from the year 1918 [23](#) a multi-ethnic state. After all, there were Jews living here, there were Germans and Hungarians living here, and everyone got along. Why, Bratislava and lots of other places in Slovakia were trilingual. That was something normal, that families spoke Slovak, Hungarian and German amongst themselves. Those of my generation that were born in Bratislava or lived here, all of us spoke Slovak, German and Hungarian. When as children we played soccer and similar games, there were Germans and Jews there, and no one cared about nationality. There weren't any problems; everyone was first and foremost a human being. There wasn't any anti-Semitism here. During the time of the Slovak State [24](#) these kinds of comments already existed. There was for example anti-Jewish propaganda in the newspapers. Suddenly things, that before people had looked at normally, changed. They began to paint Jewish stars on windows of shops owned by Jews, and so on. Finally it culminated in the persecution of Jews. It was all artificially created by the Fascist-Catholic government of the time. Yes, these are facts that are known today, but no one talks about them. And it's also my obligation to educate people, and mainly the young generation, about it and tell them how it was. So that what took place during the Holocaust and the Slovak National Uprising is never forgotten. Mainly, so that these tragic events and atrocities are never repeated.

## Glossary

### [1](#) 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 Banská 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 Banská 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.

### [2](#) Orthodox Jewish dress

Main characteristics of observant Jewish appearance and dresses: men wear a cap or hat while women wear a shawl (the latter is obligatory in case of married women only). The most peculiar skull-cap is called kippah (other name: yarmulkah) (kapedli in Yiddish), worn by men when they leave the house, reminding them of the presence of God and thus providing spiritual protection and safety. Orthodox Jewish women had their hair shaved and wore a wig. In addition, Orthodox Jewish

men wear a tallit (Hebrew term) (talles in Yiddish) [prayer shawl] and its accessories all day long under their clothes but not directly on their body. Wearing payes (Yiddish term) (payot in Hebrew) [long sideburns] is linked with the relevant prohibition in the Torah [shaving or trimming the beard as well as the hair around the head was forbidden]. The above habits originate from the Torah and the Shulchan Arukh. Other pieces of dresses, the kaftan [Russian, later Polish wear] among others, thought to be typical, are an imitation. According to non-Jews these characterize the Jews while they are not compulsory for the Jews.

### **3 Orthodox communities**

The traditionalist Jewish communities founded their own Orthodox organizations after the Universal Meeting in 1868-1869. They organized their life according to Judaist principles and opposed to assimilative aspirations. The community leaders were the rabbis. The statute of their communities was sanctioned by the king in 1871. In the western part of Hungary the communities of the German and Slovakian immigrants' descendants were formed according to the Western Orthodox principles. At the same time in the East, among the Jews of Galician origins the 'eastern' type of Orthodoxy was formed; there the Hassidism prevailed. In time the Western Orthodoxy also spread over to the eastern part of Hungary. 294 Orthodox mother-communities and 1,001 subsidiary communities were registered all over Hungary, mainly in Transylvania and in the north-eastern part of the country, in 1896. In 1930 30,4 % of Hungarian Jews belonged to 136 mother-communities and 300 subsidiary communities. This number increased to 535 Orthodox communities in 1944, including 242,059 believers (46 %).

### **4 People's and Public schools in Czechoslovakia**

In the 18th century the state intervened in the evolution of schools – in 1877 Empress Maria Theresa issued the Ratio Educationis decree, which reformed all levels of education. After the passing of a law regarding six years of compulsory school attendance in 1868, people's schools were fundamentally changed, and could now also be secular. During the First Czechoslovak Republic, the Small School Law of 1922 increased compulsory school attendance to eight years. The lower grades of people's schools were public schools (four years) and the higher grades were council schools. A council school was a general education school for youth between the ages of 10 and 15. Council schools were created in the last quarter of the 19th century as having 4 years, and were usually state-run. Their curriculum was dominated by natural sciences with a practical orientation towards trade and business. During the First Czechoslovak Republic they became 3-year with a 1-year course. After 1945 their curriculum was merged with that of lower gymnasium. After 1948 they disappeared, because all schools were nationalized.

### **5 Kashrut in eating habits**

kashrut means ritual behavior. A term indicating the religious validity of some object or article according to Jewish law, mainly in the case of foodstuffs. Biblical law dictates which living creatures are allowed to be eaten. The use of blood is strictly forbidden. The method of slaughter is prescribed, the so-called shechitah. The main rule of kashrut is the prohibition of eating dairy and meat products at the same time, even when they weren't cooked together. The time interval between eating foods differs. On the territory of Slovakia six hours must pass between the eating of a meat and dairy product. In the opposite case, when a dairy product is eaten first and then a



meat product, the time interval is different. In some Jewish communities it is sufficient to wash out one's mouth with water. The longest time interval was three hours – for example in Orthodox communities in Southwestern Slovakia.

## **6 SK Bar Kochba Bratislava**

the most important representative of swimming sports in the First Czechoslovak Republic. The club was a participant in Czechoslovak championships, which it dominated in the late 1930s. The performance of SK Bar Kochba Bratislava swimmers is also documented by the world record in the 4 x 200m freestyle relay, which was achieved by four swimmers: Frucht, Baderle, Steiner, Foldes. They also won several Czechoslovak championships in relays. SK Bar Kochba was also the most successful from the standpoint of number of titles of Czechoslovak champion in individual disciplines. In 1936, despite being nominated, athletes of Jewish nationality didn't participate in the Olympic Games in Berlin. The Czechoslovak Olympic Committee didn't recognize this legitimate protest against the political situation in Germany, denounced it in the media and financially penalized the athletes.

## **7 Hashomer Hatzair in Slovakia**

the Hashomer Hatzair movement came into being in Slovakia after WWI. It was Jewish youths from Poland, who on their way to Palestine crossed through Slovakia and here helped to found a Zionist youth movement, that took upon itself to educate young people via scouting methods, and called itself Hashomer (guard). It joined with the Kadima (forward) movement in Ruthenia. The combined movement was called Hashomer Kadima. Within the membership there were several ideologues that created a dogma that was binding for the rest of the members. The ideology was based on Borchov's theory that the Jewish nation must also become a nation just like all the others. That's why the social pyramid of the Jewish nation had to be turned upside down. He claimed that the base must be formed by those doing manual labor, especially in agriculture – that is why young people should be raised for life in kibbutzim, in Palestine. During its time of activity it organized six kibbutzim: Shaar Hagolan, Dfar Masaryk, Maanit, Haogen, Somrat and Lehavot Chaviva, whose members settled in Palestine. From 1928 the movement was called Hashomer Hatzair (Young Guard). From 1938 Nazi influence dominated in Slovakia. Zionist youth movements became homes for Jewish youth after their expulsion from high schools and universities. Hashomer Hatzair organized high school courses, re-schooling centers for youth, summer and winter camps. Hashomer Hatzair members were active in underground movements in labor camps, and when the Slovak National Uprising broke out, they joined the rebel army and partisan units. After liberation the movement renewed its activities, created youth homes in which lived mainly children who returned from the camps without their parents, organized re-schooling centers and branches in towns. After the putsch in 1948 that ended the democratic regime, half of Slovak Jews left Slovakia. Among them were members of Hashomer Hatzair. In the year 1950 the movement ended its activity in Slovakia.

## **8 Hakhsharah**

Training camps organized by the Zionists, in which Jewish youth in the Diaspora received intellectual and physical training, especially in agricultural work, in preparation for settling in Palestine.

9 Jewish Codex: Order no. 198 of the Slovakian government, issued in September 1941, on the legal status of the Jews, went down in history as Jewish Codex. Based on the Nuremberg Laws, it was one of the most stringent and inhuman anti-Jewish laws all over Europe. It paraphrased the Jewish issue on a racial basis, religious considerations were fading into the background; categories of Jew, Half Jew, moreover 'Mixture' were specified by it. The majority of the 270 paragraphs dealt with the transfer of Jewish property (so-called Aryanizing; replacing Jews by non-Jews) and the exclusion of Jews from economic, political and public life.

## **10 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.

## **11 Sered labor camp**

created in 1941 as a Jewish labor camp. The camp functioned until the beginning of the Slovak National Uprising, when it was dissolved. At the beginning of September 1944 its activities were renewed and deportations began. Due to the deportations, SS-Hauptsturmführer Alois Brunner was named camp commander at the end of September. Brunner was a long-time colleague of Adolf Eichmann and had already organized the deportation of French Jews in 1943. Because the camp registers were destroyed, the most trustworthy information regarding the number of deportees has been provided by witnesses who worked with prisoner records. According to this information, from September 1944 until the end of March 1945, 11 transports containing 11,532 persons were dispatched from the Sered camp. Up until the end of November 1944 the transports were destined for the Auschwitz concentration camp, later prisoners were transported to other camps in the Reich. The Sered camp was liquidated on 31st March 1945, when the last evacuation transport, destined for the Terezin ghetto, was dispatched. On this transport also departed the commander of the Sered camp, Alois Brunner.

## **12 Hlinka-Guards**

Military group under the leadership of the radical wing of the Slovakian Popular Party. The radicals claimed an independent Slovakia and a fascist political and public life. The Hlinka-Guards deported brutally, and without German help, 58,000 (according to other sources 68,000) Slovak Jews between March and October 1942.

## **13 Mauthausen**

concentration camp located in Upper Austria. Mauthausen was opened in August 1938. The first prisoners to arrive were forced to build the camp and work in the quarry. On May 5, 1945 American troops arrived and liberated the camp. Altogether, 199,404 prisoners passed through Mauthausen. Approximately 119,000 of them, including 38,120 Jews, were killed or died from the harsh conditions, exhaustion, malnourishment, and overwork. Rozett R. – Spector S.: Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, Facts on File, G.G. The Jerusalem Publishing House Ltd. 2000, pg. 314 – 315

## **14 Slansky trial**

In the years 1948-1949 the Czechoslovak government together with the Soviet Union strongly supported the idea of the founding of a new state, Israel. Despite all efforts, Stalin's politics never found fertile ground in Israel; therefore the Arab states became objects of his interest. In the first place the Communists had to allay suspicions that they had supplied the Jewish state with arms. The Soviet leadership announced that arms shipments to Israel had been arranged by Zionists in Czechoslovakia. The times required that every Jew in Czechoslovakia be automatically considered a Zionist and cosmopolitan. In 1951 on the basis of a show trial, 14 defendants (eleven of them were Jews) with Rudolf Slansky, First Secretary of the Communist Party at the head were convicted. Eleven of the accused got the death penalty; three were sentenced to life imprisonment. The executions were carried out on 3rd December 1952. The Communist Party later finally admitted its mistakes in carrying out the trial and all those sentenced were socially and legally rehabilitated in 1963.

## **15 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.

## **16 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.

## **17 The Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters (SZPB)**

its beginnings reach back to the year 1945 and culminated at the IV. Slovak Congress in 1969 in Bratislava with a constitutional congress of the SZPB. It was founded by participants in the national fight for liberation and against Fascism along with citizens jailed for political and racial reasons

during World War II. The Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters is a politically independent, non-party organization. The organization strives together with democratic forces of all orientations, all age categories, nationalities and ethnic groups, and religious convictions for the development of a sovereign, democratic and socially just Slovakia in a democratic Europe.

<http://www.szpb.sk>

## **18 Act of the Slovak National Assembly on compensation**

In connection with the realization of Act of the Slovak National Assembly No. 305/1999 Coll., as amended by Act of the Slovak National Assembly No. 126/2002 Coll., on the alleviation of some injustices to persons deported to Nazi concentration camps and prison camps. The compensation applies for deportation to Nazi concentration and prison camps and jailing in them during the years 1939 to 1945, and for death during deportation and jailing in a concentration camp or prison camp. According to the stated Act, it was necessary to submit a claim for compensation at the ministry in a written request, which had to be delivered to the ministry no later than 2nd December 2002, otherwise the right to compensation in accordance with the Act was forfeited. In connection with the realization of compensation in accordance with Act of the Slovak National Assembly No. 255/1998 Coll. as amended by Act of the Slovak National Assembly No. 422/2002 Coll. on compensation for persons stricken by violent criminal acts, the act governs financial compensation of persons whose health was damaged as a consequence of intentional violent criminal acts. Compensation may be requested by a claimant who is a citizen of the Slovak Republic, or a person without citizenship who has valid permanent residency in the territory of the Slovak Republic, if the damage occurred within the territory of the Slovak Republic.

[19](#) Gasparovic, Ivan (b.1941): Slovak politician and law professor, became President of Slovakia on June 15, 2004.

[20](#) Langos, Jan: (1946 – 2006): was a Slovak politician. After finishing his studies, he worked as an experimental physicist at the Technical Cybernetics Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. He was active in the dissident movement, and together with Jan Carnogursky published the samizdat "Bratislavské listy". After the Velvet Revolution, in 1990, he became the deputy chairman of the Federal Assembly, and later (1990 – 1992) was the Minister of the Interior of the Czechoslovak Federal Republic. From 1994 – 2002, he was a member of the National Council (Parliament) of the Slovak Republic. From 1995 to 2000, he was the chairman of the Democratic Party. From May 2003 to June 2006 he was the director of the Slovak Institute of National Memory.

## **21 Statni Tajna Bezpecnost**

Czechoslovak intelligence and security service founded in 1948.

## **22 The Nation's Memory Institute**

a public institution founded by the Act of the National Council of the Slovak Republic No. 553/2002 Coll. The mission of the Institute is to provide individuals access to the heretofore undisclosed records of the activities of the repressive organs of the Slovak and Czechoslovak states in the period of oppression. Functioning within the scope of the institute is also a department of legal analysis and reconstruction of documents. It processes and evaluates the records and the activity of the security agencies of the state in the 1939-1989 period from the penal law perspective, focusing on the actual perpetration of crimes against humanity and other severe criminal acts,

conflicting with the fundamentals of rule of law. In cooperation with the Public Prosecution Office, it works out and files charges against these crimes. The Section, using the evidence available from the acquired documents, reconstructs the organizational structure of the security agencies, including its development, changes and staffing and maps their repressive activities. Information gained from the processing of documents from so-called relational databases lead to the reconstruction of destroyed and lost documents.

### **23 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.

### **24 Slovak State (1939-1945)**

Czechoslovakia, which was created after the disintegration of Austria-Hungary, lasted until it was broken up by the Munich Pact of 1938; Slovakia became a separate (autonomous) republic on 6th October 1938 with Jozef Tiso as Slovak PM. Becoming suspicious of the Slovakian moves to gain independence, the Prague government applied martial law and deposed Tiso at the beginning of March 1939, replacing him with Karol Sidor. Slovakian personalities appealed to Hitler, who used this appeal as a pretext for making Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia a German protectorate. On 14th March 1939 the Slovak Diet declared the independence of Slovakia, which in fact was a nominal one, tightly controlled by Nazi Germany.