

IT'S NECESSARY TO START FIGHTING EVIL AS SOON AS THE FIRST SLAP

Alexander Bachnár (*1919)

"We waited with rifles, pistols, a grenade, and even two light machine guns, for the camp commander to appear," remembers Alexander Bachnár with a smile. He is the last surviving member of a Jewish partisan unit that was later formed by ex-prisoners. Sergeant Gabčan, the head of the guards, walked out of the guardhouse at 7 am wearing only pyjamas. When he saw the armed prisoners, he said with wonder: *"Fellows, I knew you had weapons, but I had no idea you had so many."*

To this day, Bachnár likes to think back to that commander. *"I remember what he said word for word. He called us 'fellows'. He didn't say prisoners, he didn't say Jews, he said fellows."* In the period right before the uprising, brutal and fanatical Hlinka guard members had been replaced by ordinary gendarmes, many of whom were, says Bachnár, decent people. So in the end not just prisoners but wardens departed from the Nováky camp to take part in the uprising.

However, Bachnár's struggles had begun much earlier. It was shortly after 1939 that, because of his Jewish origins, he was barred from studying at the teaching academy he'd dreamt of. He recalls clearly the intensifying orders and bans he faced due to his background following the creation of the Slovak state, a satellite of Hitler's Germany. One day when he and his nephew visited a local park in their native Topolčany there was a sign by the entrance: No Jews or dogs allowed.

Alexander Bachnár was born on 29 July 1919, meaning he has strong memories of Czechoslovakia's First Republic era, when a Jewish minority lived in harmony alongside the majority in his native Topolčany. Indeed, in the early 1930s the front row on Yom Kippur and other major Jewish holidays was also reserved for mayors and local Slovak People's Party leaders. *"Relations deteriorated when Aryanisation arrived and many people had the opportunity to steal Jewish property with impunity,"* he says.

Though Jews were at that time referred to as exploiters of the nation, his family lived incredibly modestly. Alexander was one of 10 children. Before his birth, his parents, Jakub and Františka, had sought their fortune in the US. Not finding it, they returned to

Topolčany, where Jakub worked as a painter. However, it was tough feeding a family of 12 and Alexander was the only one of his siblings who had a chance to study.

Persecution on the part of the Slovak state soon began to deeply impact the family. Not long after Alexander was expelled from the Pedagogical Academy in Bratislava the People's Party regime assigned him to the 6th Labour Battalion. In that special military unit unreliable types were handed uniforms that had belonged to members of the Austro-Hungarian navy, dyed blue, and round sailors' hats. They worked on construction projects around the country. When Alexander's service ended in June 1942, the regime sent him to a labour camp in Nováky. At that time deportations were gathering pace. There he met the rest of his family.

"Apart from my two sisters, who unfortunately had been sent to Auschwitz, and three of my brothers, two older and one younger, who had been sent to Majdanek. Not one of those five family members, my brothers and sisters, survived," he says. As a prisoner his first job involved working with coal. In those days transports regularly left Nováky for parts unknown. He was designated for one but his sister Ela saved him at the last moment by having his name struck off the list, a fact he learned of only years later. For a long time he was tormented about the fate of the person who replaced him on the list.

Despite the transports, which were in full flow, there was great zest for life in Nováky. There was a camp theatre, where prisoners performed plays by the future famous writer Leopold Lahola and *The Makropulos Affair* by Čapek, though to prevent it being banned they let on it was by an unknown writer. A play about immortality and dreams of eternal life was performed at a place from which transports left for Auschwitz.

In that antechamber of death he realised a long-held dream. A Jewish prisoner, a student expelled from the Pedagogical Academy, started teaching for the first time. The then education minister, Jozef Sivák, had given permission for the establishment of elementary schools for Jewish children.

Alexander tried to introduce the higher grades in particular to classical music. *"A Jewish organisation sent a high-quality record player and outstanding records to the school,"* he says, explaining that he wished to apply Comenius's method of teaching through play.

Alongside this Alexander Bachnár also became involved in the secret camp resistance. He recalls in this regard an episode from Martin, where he and a French teacher he knew attempted to inconspicuously smuggle weapons into the camp.

"Naturally everything was carried out illegally. In the evening, when the professor brought a rifle, we left it in the cloakroom in the train station in Nováky. Two chaps went

to the station to pick the rifle up the following day. When they got there, a station worker told them: 'Boys, I know what it is – wrap it better the next time.' That's just an illustration of how citizens, ordinary people, saw those events," says Bachnár.

Among those involved in the camp resistance was Juraj Špitzer, who later became a writer and in 1968 interviewed Alexander Mach, a minister of the war-time state. The prisoners were trained by Professor Imrich Müller, who later became a commander of their unit. It was formed the same day that the armed men stood up to their camp commander Sergeant Gabčan, who had also refused to disgrace himself.

"Those of you who want to fight in the uprising, come here – we're going to Štubnianske Teplice, where the uprising gendarmerie command is. Those who don't want to, go home." He himself took part in the uprising, most notably in battles in the areas of Zlaté Moravce, Uherce, Zlatno and Skýcov, where he was injured. Thanks to Alexander Bachnár the former commander of the Jewish assembly camp received certificate no. 255 as a participant in the resistance.

The story of the former prisoners was different. The camp was dissolved and the civilians made for the centre of the uprising, Banská Bystrica. Among them were also children from Bachnár's class. Around 250 young, battle-ready Jewish boys joined the resistance, of whom around 20 specialists – medics, engineers and artillerymen – were sent to military units. The remaining 230 made up a strike company and after three weeks' training in Zemianske Kostolany were sent into battle. Their Jewish unit was first deployed at Baťovany, Bielice and Veľké Uherce. There they held the front for around three weeks before the order came from Banská Bystrica to join Captain Jegorov's group. They later encountered the commander Zorič's elite military group.

"Of our whole novice group, in which there were over 200 men, 38 chaps died in the uprising. Statistically, few fighting groups had as many fallen as ours. So that's also a sign that we tried our best to do what was expected of us," says Alexander Bachnár.

During the uprising he received two letters by field post. *"Dear teacher, it definitely won't last much longer and the war will end soon,"* his students wrote. He has kept the old letters in shaky children's writing to this day. They told him the Russians were near and war would soon be over. However, the Nazis murdered much of the class at Kremnička. Bachnár's mother's life also ended there. His father was saved by the fact that he broke his leg on a march to be executed and the Germans didn't notice him. Doctor Petelen hid him selflessly until the end of the war.

Following the war only three members of the entire family saw one another again: his father, his older sister Ela, who survived a concentration camp, and Alexander. However, shortly after the war, anti-Jewish pogroms broke out in their native Topolčany so the family moved. Alexander quickly snapped out of the leftist views he'd had as a student when the show trials began. He found work as a journalist in Bratislava though that finished in 1968 when he sharply criticised the regime and ended up in a factory. However, he had met his future wife at the newspaper. They had three children, daughters Alexandra and Ivana and a son, Ivan.

Bachnár has received an award from the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters, got the highest state honour from President Andrej Kiska a quarter-century after the Velvet Revolution and has also been recognised by the Museum of the Holocaust in Washington. He has not just helped survivors but after the Velvet Revolution assisted with the Milan Šimečka Foundation's work on this subject.

Though he had dreamt of teaching, that passion was lost after what happened to his first class. But he maintains his love of classical music to this day. He lives in Bratislava at the Ohel David retirement home for Holocaust survivors, where he has organised classical music listening sessions every Saturday for a number of years.

How does he look back today on the events of the past? *"I've thought about this a lot. The Holocaust didn't start with the loading of Jews onto cattle wagons. It started in the moment people gave Jews slaps with impunity. What we call the Holocaust, the concentration camps, was just the conclusion of the Holocaust. But it began with that first slap. So it teaches us that it's necessary to start fighting evil as soon as the first slap."*

Text by Soňa Gyarfašová