United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Paul Kovac
March 23, 1990
RG-50.030*0117

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Paul Kovac, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on March 23, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

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PAUL KOVAC
March 23, 1990

Q: Uh, can you please tell us your name and when you born and where?

A: My name is Paul Kovac. It uh is pronounced Kovach, in my mother tongue. I was born in Slovakia, in a small city of Tren_ín on the 6th of December, 1938.

Q: Uh can you tell us your earliest recollections of, from your childhood about your town and your home, your family?

A: We used to live in a small city of Martin (ph). I was born in Tren_ín but my father was a professor at a small agricultural college in Martin. My grandparents used to live in Tren_ín and that's where my mother went when I was to be born. I used to attend the kindergarten in Martin and that's where we used to live until September of 1944. Since my father was a professor at this college he was sort of indispensable and uh he was exempt from having to wear the David Star in the Slovak state where it was otherwise compulsive for everybody of Jewish origin. This uh privilege was also given to the whole family, uh that is for my mother and also for my grandparents, who who came to live with us uh in the mid-forties, probably in '43 and uh that's when they left Tren_ín and came to Martin to live with us, because it was safer for them to stay with the breadwinner who was actually exempt.

Q: Can you tell us about your birth certificate? There was something unusual.

A: Uh, yes. As a matter of fact I, shortly after I was born, simply because it was safer, my parents had me convert to to Roman Catholicism. I became Roman Catholic and actually this shows on my birth certificate where the religion from Israeli was changed to Roman Catholic. On the old piece of paper it is still obvious that the change was made. It shows on the aged piece of paper where on the line which shows religion, there's a sort of faint uh piece of, faint piece which shows that the the change was made there. Uh I was not brought up in a very religious way but uh after the war I attended uh religious classes with the other Roman Catholic kids in the public school, and this uh was the case until 1949, when uh religious classes were no longer compulsory at public schools because of the change in the government.

Q: Did you know of being Jewish?

A: Yes, I knew I was Jewish. But uh my family was a family of non-practicing Jews. We were never very religious and therefore I was not brought in brought up in that way.

Q: What do you recall of the Germans coming to your town, and how did that change your life?

A: Well, actually I didn't actually see the German soldiers come into the town. The way our life changed was that uh in late August of 1944, when there was a time of Slovak national

uprising, my father was notified somehow by his friends that the situation is becoming more dangerous for Jewish people, and he was uh advised to leave the city and leave the school. Uh there was a small agricultural uh farm associated with the college where my father used to teach, and he was able to steal a horse and a cart, and he put the whole family on this with very few belongings and we went to one of his former acquaintances who was a farmer and who used to come to my father for advice and they somehow became friendly and my father considered this to be a safe place to hide, at least in the beginning. And this farmer, I don't recall his name, but this farmer had he had again some other friends, farmers further in the country, and that's where we were directed. I don't really recall how we got there but this was in a small village called Klenowitz. The farmers in the in the village of Klenowitz used to operate in such a way that their family homes were in the village but their their farms, their fields, their animals, were further in the mountains, and they had a second home there where they used to stay during the summer when they had to work in the fields. Now we, the family of five now - my grandparents from my father's side and the three of us - went to one of these farmers with the family of Pavel Vancik and his brother Andrei Vancik. My father, my mother and myself, we stayed with the family of Pavel and my grandparents stayed on another hill with the family of Andrei Vancik. We spent most of the time from September until, from September 1944 until uh April 1945 with these families, and we only in...only occasionally had to leave when it was more dangerous, it would be more dangerous for us to stay with the family. During those times we had to leave, we were helped by the family, Vancik family who took us further to the mountains where they knew some lumberjacks who had their huts there, and uh it was considered more more safe and uh more difficult to access by the Germans. I remember one occasion when we stayed in this hut which was situated very close to a nearby road that a column of German cars, army cars loaded with German soldiers and pulling some other military equipment came close to this to this hut and uh they were attacked by a group of three partisans. There was a short exchange of bullets and uh it ended up by killing these three uh partisans. I remember that uh when this all ended we we went to see these these dead bodies and the adults who were in our group actually buried these bodies very close by. Also, uh when this shooting ended, the Germans decided not to go any further into the mountains and uh they were ready to leave, but the road was very narrow and they had to turn this uh equipment and also the cars - there was one cannon which had to be turned, and uh during this process there were few minutes that the cannon pointed actually at the hut where we all stayed. There were family, families, maybe three or four families, where there were also adults and children, and out of desperation I believe, the adults asked all the kids to line up in front of this small hut. Probably they wanted to make it pretty obvious that there are children there and wanted somehow to prevent the Germans somehow from from attacking us. Well, this probably worked because the Germans didn't actually shoot at us. They turned and then they left. But it was very dramatic.

Q: What are your recollections of your life in hiding? What was what was the house like? How did you eat? What what was your daily life like?

A: Well, this family, Andrei Vancik family and Pavel Vancik family, they the adults were about of the same age as my parents and they had kids. Uh I remember that there were some boys

and some girls, but we were about the same age, so we spent our days in a in a very common way as probably any other families would would spend. Occasionally my father had to leave because there was some news uh coming from the village that Germans were about to go to the mountains to look for partisans, and at that time it would be dangerous for any man to be found because they would be uh either sent to labor camps or if they were they would be found that they are Jewish then obviously they would be either shot on the spot or would be send to concentration camps. In this way actually uh my cousin's father was shot in in front of his mother's and his own eyes because they were hiding somewhere and were caught by by Germans and he as a man found being Jewish was shot on the spot, and uh my cousin and my his mother was sent to Theresienstadt to the concentration camp, so you know in order for this not to happen to us, my father always left somewhere when we were notified that the Germans were coming. I remember one one occasion like this when I remember there was a heavy snow before, night night before, and uh he left to hide himself in the snow in the in the forest and when he came back several hours later, he was almost completely frozen. We had to somehow rub his uh body and uh try to somehow revive him. He must have had very a very strong constitution because I don't remember his getting sick or anything but I know that it was it was terrible.

Q: Did you have contact with other villagers?

A: Well, yes. As a matter of fact uh it was a large family, these Vancik people people. We came into direct contact also with some other members of the family but I don't recall our going down to the village actually. We stayed most of most of the time in these mountains, so there was not much much contact with other people but some members of his family, of family, Vancik family occasionally showed up and we spent some time with them, but well there was not much social life. I can tell you that. (Pause)

Q: What else do you recall about hiding? (Pause) Do you remember any particular person especially who influenced you during that time? (Pause)

A: I don't seem don't seem to recall anything. (Pause)

Q: What happened after that period of time in the mountains? What did you do? Where did you go from there?

A: You mean after the war?

Q: Yes, after after, right. What was the liberation like?

A: We were liberated in uh in 1945 uh in the Spring by the Russian Army; and I remember that uh with this army of Russians also a lot of Romanian troops came. They were probably supporting the Russians after...after the Romanian government uh turned against the Russians, uh against the Germans because it was pretty obvious that obvious and also convenient because uh it was obvious that the Germans are going to loose the war. After,

right after the liberation, my father got a job with the new minin...newly formed Ministry of Agriculture and we left Klenowitz to Košice. The first Czechoslovak government was set up there. And from Košice, as the government moved to the city of Bratislava, we moved to Bratislava. And that's where I actually got all my education, and I lived there until 1981.

Q: What was your life like in Bratislava as a Jew after the war?

A: Uh, well, I...as I mentioned before, I have not been brought up in a religious way. We were non-practicing. Uh my father was an idealist and a naive person in a way, because he believed that assimilation will help him avoid anti-Semitism. And it may have worked to a certain point. Uh I remember that some of his older documents are still carrying his original name, Kohn, and some early documents like his uh wedding papers already carry his name, Kovac. Uh we have never belonged to any congregation, simply because we didn't want to be conspicuous. And I actually don't seem to recall anybody of the family going to a synagogue, ever - except maybe when some friends had a wedding there or that was probably the only time. When I remember I went to the one and only uh working synagogue in Bratislava. The other synagogue which was in Bratislava, a very old beautiful building, was never operating as far as I remember. It was used as a as a store room for something and later it was also torn down when there was a construction of the new bridge in the city of Bratislava. Somehow that seemed to be the best place to build a new bridge so that the synagogue could be torn down.

Q: How did you go on with your education at this point?

A: Well, I attended my my basic education I attended in public schools and uh later I was admitted to the university, the technical university in Bratislava and I don't seem to recall suffering much from anti-Semitism until after I was out of school. It could be because of the overall atmosphere was not such that it was uh good for those who would want to express their anti-Semitism to really do so. All simply because I didn't advertise for myself as being Jewish. But somehow it works in such a way that even though I don't know how, everybody finds out about you. And whenever it's convenient, they let you know that you are different. This happened to me during my later years when I was already employed. If there was things which I was not allowed to do or were forbidden for me to do, then the explanation was uh indirectly made in such a way that I am different than everybody else. They didn't really call me names, but it was pretty obvious what the reason was that I couldn't do this or that.

Q: What was your field? What did you study and how did you proceed in your career?

A: I finished...I got a degree, a Master's Degree, in Chemistry from technical university in Bratislava. After finishing my education there, I I went to to serve in the army for one year, and after that I entered the graduate school of Slovak Academy of Sciences to work on my thesis, on my Ph.D. thesis. After that I got a job with Slovak Academy of Sciences and from there also I was able to come to the United States for fifteen months as a post-doctoral fellow to work for the Department of Biochemistry at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana. I

spent uh fifteen months there, and uh ironically I went back to Czechoslovakia in December 1968. That is after the August occupation by the Russians. Uh of course uh coming back was a big disappointment for me then. What the country looked like and how the life changed and everything, and it took me thirteen years to eventually get an exit visa to visit some relatives in Austria and that was when I made my decision to eventually immigrate to the United States.

Q: When did you get married, and uh was Judaism a factor in your marriage?

A: Absolutely not. Uh I got married in 1962. The...the marriage ceremony was a was a civil ceremony, neither ...neither Jewish or Catholic or anything. And uh actually we have brought up our son in a very similar, non-religious way. He knows who he is, what his heritage is, but uh we have never emphasized the religion very much.

Q: When and how did you come to the United States?

A: We came in 1981, in September. We didn't really jump the fence, but in a way we escaped anyway. Uh we got permission to visit my wife's sisters who happened to live in Vienna, Austria. And uh we simply packed whatever we could and left everything else behind.

Q: And then from Vienna you came here?

A: From Vienna, we were we immediately as we arrived in Vienna, we first uh tried to, I tried to get a job either in Austria or in Switzerland. This didn't work out because 1981 was a very bad year economically both in the United States and in Europe, and since I was in this country before, that was my next choice. I have a distant cousin in California, and uh with his sponsorship it was rather easy uh to get here within a relatively short time. We first went to HIAS in Vienna, and with their help we were able to take care of the formalities in a rather uneventful way. It took us only six weeks and we had our visas and were flown to the United States. I remember that with my with my cousin's friend uh help it took me only two weeks to get a job. It was not the best job, but it was a job and I could start working again as a chemist. I had a job with a small chemical company in Torrence, California. It was a very good experience for me, and this is how I first encountered private industry in this country. But uh I always wanted to work in research because this is how I was trained. And uh luckily I managed to obtain this position at the National Institutes of Health; first as a visiting scientist, and later I was tenured. We became citizens of the United States in 1986. We applied five years to the day when we landed in this country, and it took about three or four months to get a citizenship then.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experiences during the Nazi era?

A: Well, to make these things a little bit easier to understand why...why uh it happened only in 1944 that we had to leave our homes, probably it would be good to mention that, in a way, we owe our survival until '44... It's...it's an irony, but we owe it to the Munich Pact. Because

during that time - I mean, this was the...this was the way for the Slovaks to get their autonomy. When Czechoslovak Republic was first cut into pieces, then the eastern part of the country became an independent Slovak state; and this is what the Slovaks always wanted. They always felt oppressed by either Hungarians or the Austrians. And throughout several hundred years, they have never been independent. And uh they accepted, actually, this tragedy--the Munich Pact-- because this gave them the the opportunity to become independent. Hitler actually used Slovak state as a showcase. He showed the rest of the world that a country which is actually under their command can be prosperous. And many educated people of Jewish origin were able to survive, because they were sort of indispensable. So they were exempt from, for example, wearing their David Stars-- which was normally an obligation for everybody who was Jewish. I was able to attend public kindergarten. My father was able to keep his job until 1944--September. Until after the Slovak National Uprising, when the things became more dangerous.

Q: And you had mentioned something about Jews fighting in the Slovak...the Slovak Army, even.

A: Well, this was another privilege sort of which the citizens of Slovakia of Jewish origin were granted, to serve in Slovak Army against the Russians. Actually my uncle, my father's brother, younger brother, died on the Russian front as a member of Slovak Army. This is how the Germans wanted to show the rest of the world that they are treating everybody equal in that country.

Q: Thank you very much for the interesting story.