GLOBAL SLOVAKIA
OUR FUTURE IS GREATER THAN OUR PAST



REMEMBERING JEWISH SLOVAKIA

A Thousand Years of Life, Loss & Legacy



Today, Slovakia is home to around 4,000 Jews. Yet not so long ago, the country was home to one of Central Europe's most vibrant Jewish populations.

For nearly a thousand years, Jewish communities lived in the lands that today form Slovakia. They built synagogues and schools, established renowned centers of religious learning, developed businesses and industries, and contributed to the country's science, medicine, culture, architecture, commerce, and intellectual life.

By the outbreak of the Second World War, around 130,000 Jews called Slovakia home. The Holocaust devastated that world.

But the history of Jewish Slovakia is not only a story of destruction. It is also a story of faith and scholarship, enterprise and creativity, family and community, extraordinary courage and survival.

This commemorative publication by Global Slovakia remembers that world through the places and people who shaped it – and through the traces of Jewish Slovakia that remain with us today.

A THOUSAND YEARS OF JEWISH LIFE

The story of Slovakia's Jewish community stretches back almost one thousand years.
Although the earliest records are scarce, Jews were living in the territory by the 11th century. By the 13th century, Bratislava was already home to one of the region's oldest established Jewish communities.

Life was rarely easy.

For centuries, Jews faced restrictions on where they could settle, which professions they could enter and, at times, even where they could bury their dead. Communities were expelled from some towns, welcomed into others, and repeatedly forced to adapt to changing rulers, laws and economic conditions.

Yet they endured.

A gradual transformation began during the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century. Jews gained greater civil rights, access to universities and permission to settle in towns and enter professions that had previously been closed to them.
Equality remained incomplete, but new opportunities allowed Jewish communities across Slovakia to prosper.

By the eve of the Second World War, the country was home to between 200 and 300 synagogues and a Jewish population of approximately 130,000.

Jewish schools and yeshivas educated new generations. Entrepreneurs developed businesses and industries. Doctors, lawyers, scientists, artists and merchants became part of the fabric of towns and cities across the country.

Their history was never separate from the history of Slovakia.

It was one of its defining chapters.

A THOUSAND YEARS OF JEWISH LIFE IN SLOVAKIA

Jewish communities have lived in Slovakia for centuries. Their story is not a footnote in Slovakia's history. It is one of its defining chapters.



BRATISLAVA: THE JERUSALEM OF THE DANUBE

Among the great centers of Jewish life in Slovakia, one city achieved extraordinary international importance.

Bratislava, then known as Pressburg, became one of the leading centers of Jewish learning in Europe.

During the late 18th and 19th centuries, the city emerged as a major center of Orthodox Judaism in the Kingdom of Hungary, largely through the influence of the renowned Rabbi Moses Sofer, better known as the Chatam Sofer.

His Pressburg Yeshiva became one of Europe's largest and most prestigious rabbinical academies. Hundreds of students came to study there, while rabbis from across Europe sought the Chatam Sofer's guidance. More than 1,200 of his religious rulings continue to influence Jewish scholarship.

Jewish Bratislava was not confined to religious life.

Before the Second World War, around 15,000 Jews (roughly 12 percent of the city's population) lived there. They contributed to its commerce, architecture, culture and intellectual life.

Much of that world has disappeared.

Yet one extraordinary place remains.

The Mausoleum of Chatam Sofer preserves part of Bratislava's historic Jewish cemetery and continues to attract Orthodox Jewish pilgrims from around the world.

It is a reminder of a Bratislava that many people no longer know – not simply a Central European crossroads, but a city that once stood among the great spiritual centers of Jewish Europe.

BRATISLAVA THE JERUSALEM OF THE DANUBE





CITY OF SCHOLARS

Once known as Pressburg, Bratislava became one of the great centers of Jewish learning in Europe. Under Rabbi Moses Sofer, also known as Chatam Sofer, the Pressburg Yeshiva drew students from across the continent. Before World War II, about 15,000 Jews, roughly 12% of the city's population, helped shape its culture, commerce, and intellectual life.

WHEN THE LIGHTS WENT OUT

For generations, Jewish communities had survived restrictions, expulsions and prejudice.

But the events that began unfolding in Europe in the late 1930s were different.

They would threaten the very existence of Jewish life in Slovakia.

Following the dismantling of Czechoslovakia, the Slovak State emerged in 1939 as an ally and satellite of Nazi Germany.

Anti-Jewish measures intensified rapidly.

On September 9, 1941, the Slovak government introduced the Jewish Codex, one of the most extensive bodies of anti-Jewish legislation in Europe.

With the force of law, Jewish citizens were stripped of fundamental civil and human rights.

Businesses and property were confiscated. Jews were excluded from professions, schools and public life. Their freedom of movement and participation in society became increasingly restricted.

Prejudice had become policy.

Then came the deportations.



WHEN THE LIGHTS ✡ WENT OUT

FOR SLOVAKIA'S JEWISH COMMUNITY

The turning point came in **1938**.

In **1941**, the Jewish Codex stripped Slovak Jews of their rights, property, and place in public life.

REMEMBER THE TURNING POINT

THE DEPORTATIONS

In March 1942, a transport carrying 999 young Jewish women and girls departed from Poprad for Auschwitz.

It was the beginning of a catastrophe.

Over the following years, tens of thousands of Slovak Jews were deported to Nazi concentration and extermination camps.

Families disappeared from towns where they had lived for generations.

Businesses closed.

Synagogues emptied.

Entire communities vanished.

Before the war, approximately 130,000 Jews lived in Slovakia. By its end, only a fraction remained. Many of the survivors later emigrated, further transforming the Jewish presence in the country.

Today, traces of that lost world remain everywhere.

They can be found in magnificent synagogues that stand almost silent, in overgrown Jewish cemeteries, museums and memorials, and in the small brass Stolpersteine – “stumbling stones” – embedded in pavements outside the former homes of Holocaust victims.

Each represents an individual life.

Together, they are echoes of a community that once formed an integral part of Slovakia.



WHEN THE LIGHTS ✡ WENT OUT

FOR SLOVAKIA'S JEWISH COMMUNITY

Before the war, around **130,000** Jews lived in Slovakia.

By its end, only **15,000–25,000** remained.

GLOBAL SLOVAKIA
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REMEMBER THE TURNING POINT

SEREĎ: THE BRICKS THAT REMEMBER

History sometimes survives in unexpected objects.

At the former concentration camp in Sereď, today home to Slovakia's Holocaust Museum, it survives even in the bricks.

During the Second World War, Slovakia operated concentration and labour camps at Sereď, Nováky and Vyhne, together with numerous smaller labour centers. Sereď became one of the principal places from which Slovak Jews were deported.

But the buildings had not originally been constructed as a concentration camp.

They began as military barracks for the Czechoslovak Army.

And many of their bricks came from a factory owned by a Jewish philanthropist.

His name was Štefan Kriser.

Before the war, Štefan Kriser was a successful Jewish industrialist and philanthropist from Pezinok.

His brickworks supplied construction materials throughout the region, including bricks used for the military barracks at Sereď.

Many were stamped simply:

KRISER PEZINOK

Kriser could never have imagined what those buildings would later become.

He sold the brickworks in 1939 and escaped with his family to France. His two sons joined the Czechoslovak Army and fought against Nazi Germany. Kriser himself died in exile in Paris in 1942. His wife survived the war and later emigrated to the United States.

His legacy, however, reaches beyond industry.

During the First World War, Kriser used his wealth to establish and equip a hospital in Pezinok at his own expense. During a period of enormous hardship, it treated nearly 500 patients.

Today, visitors to Sereď can still find his name pressed into its bricks.

There is a painful irony in their survival.

The man whose wealth once helped save lives unknowingly supplied the material from which buildings later used to imprison Jews were constructed.

His name remains embedded in their walls.

THE MAN WHO BUILT A CONCENTRATION CAMP WITHOUT EVER KNOWING IT

The camp at Sereď was built before the war. The bricks came from a brickworks in Pezinok owned by **Štefan Kriser,** a Slovak industrialist and philanthropist.





SURVIVAL WAS MADE OF INDIVIDUAL LIVES

The Holocaust is often described through numbers.

Numbers are essential. They reveal the enormous scale of what happened. But behind every number was a person.

A family.

A childhood.

A profession.

A love.

A future that someone hoped to live.

Some of those lives ended in the camps. Others survived through extraordinary combinations of courage, chance, sacrifice and human connection.

Their stories allow us to encounter Jewish Slovakia not as an abstraction, but through individual people.

SURVIVAL WAS MADE OF *INDIVIDUAL LIVES*



LALE & GITA

In 1942, a young Slovak Jew from Krompachy named Ludwig “Lale” Eisenberg, later known as Lale Sokolov, arrived at Auschwitz.

There, he was assigned an unimaginable task: tattooing identification numbers onto newly arrived prisoners.

His position gave him slightly greater freedom of movement than most prisoners. Whenever possible, he used it to obtain food and supplies and help others survive.

Then one day, he tattooed a number onto the arm of a young Slovak woman.
Her name was Gita Fuhrmannová.

A relationship slowly formed under circumstances designed to destroy every expression of ordinary human life.

They exchanged only brief moments together, but Lale held onto a conviction that somehow they would both survive.

Eight days before Auschwitz was liberated, he was transferred to Mauthausen in Austria. He eventually escaped and returned to Czechoslovakia.

He knew Gita’s name, but little else.

Believing survivors would pass through Bratislava on their way home, Lale began waiting at the railway station.

Day after day, he watched arriving trains.

And then, against extraordinary odds, he found her.

Gita had survived.

They married in 1945 and settled in Bratislava, where Lale established a successful business.

After the Communist takeover, his business was nationalized and he was imprisoned. In 1948, the couple fled Czechoslovakia and eventually built a new life in Australia.

For decades, their story remained largely unknown.

Late in his life, Lale began to tell it.

It would eventually inspire The Tattooist of Auschwitz and introduce millions of readers around the world to the story of two Slovak Jews whose relationship survived one of humanity’s darkest chapters.

A LOVE STORY *BORN IN* AUSCHWITZ



After arriving at Auschwitz in 1942, Slovak Jew Lale Sokolov tattooed a number on the arm of a young woman named Gita Fuhrmannová. In that moment, he made himself a promise.

"One day, I will marry you."

Against all odds, they found each other again in Bratislava and married in 1945. Their story later inspired. The Tattooist of Auschwitz.

FIGHTING BACK IN THE STREETS OF BRATISLAVA

Not every story of Jewish Slovakia during the rise of fascism is a story of passive persecution.

Some fought back.

Before the Second World War engulfed Europe, antisemitic violence was already spreading through the streets of Bratislava.

Two young Jewish athletes became known for defending their community.

One was Dávid “Dufi” Unreich.

The other was Imi Lichtenfeld.

Dufi had once studied at Bratislava’s famous yeshiva with the intention of becoming a rabbi. But he also became an exceptional wrestler.

Together with Lichtenfeld and others, he helped organize Jewish self-defence groups as fascist and Nazi-aligned groups increasingly targeted Jewish residents in Bratislava’s streets and trams.

As the danger intensified, both men eventually escaped.

Dufi reached the United States, where he wrestled under the names Ben Shalom and later David Vance. He became an undefeated heavyweight champion, reportedly winning 100 consecutive matches.

At the height of his fame, he publicly challenged Adolf Hitler himself to face him in the wrestling ring – turning sport into a very public act of defiance.

His own family was not spared.

In 1944, Dufi’s parents and sister were deported from Bratislava to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they were murdered.

Imi Lichtenfeld escaped to Palestine.

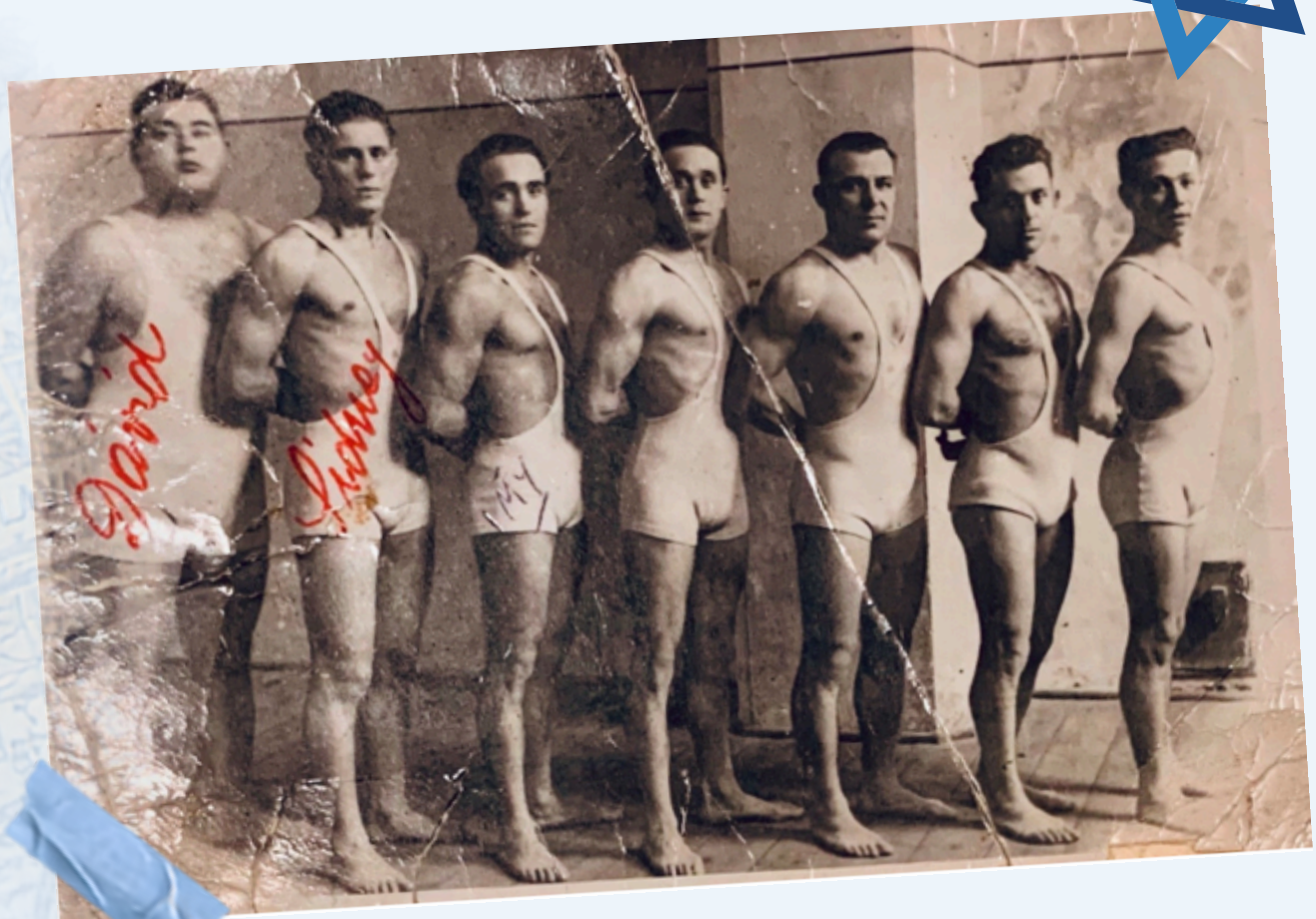
There, his experience in boxing, wrestling, gymnastics and street fighting contributed to the development of a practical system of self-defence.

That system became Krav Maga.

Today, it is practiced around the world.
Two young Jewish men from Bratislava followed remarkably different paths.
One became a champion.
The other created one of the world’s most influential systems of self-defence.
Both carried with them lessons first learned while defending their community at home.

THE JEWISH FIGHTERS
WHO DEFENDED THE STREETS OF
BRATISLAVA

In the darkest days, two young Jewish men from Bratislava chose **courage** over fear.



THE ARTIST WHO SURVIVED AUSCHWITZ

Some survived because a particular talent made them useful to their captors.

For the Slovak artist Ľudovít Feld, that talent was drawing.

Born into a Jewish family in Košice in 1904, Feld stopped growing at the age of eight because of a rare disorder. Barely more than a meter tall as an adult, he nevertheless became one of Slovakia's most accomplished graphic artists.

He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest and later opened his own art school in Košice.

Then came 1944.

Feld was reportedly omitted from an initial deportation list through the intervention of a former student.

But his family was being deported.

Rather than abandon them, Feld went with them to Auschwitz.

Almost twenty members of his family were murdered.

His artistic ability attracted the attention of Josef Mengele. Feld was forced to produce drawings and portraits, including documentation associated with Mengele's pseudoscientific experiments.

The work almost certainly helped keep Feld alive.

Yet his survival was not the only life he helped preserve.

Near the end of the war, as Auschwitz was being evacuated, Feld persuaded fifteen children living in his barracks not to appear for morning roll call.

They hid beneath wooden bunks for ten days and nights in freezing conditions and with almost no food.

All fifteen survived.

Decades later, two of those children returned to Košice.
They came to thank him.
After the emotional reunion, Feld reportedly said simply:
"Now I can die."
After the war, he remained in his beloved Košice, painting, teaching and inspiring younger artists.
His legacy survives not only in his art, but in the lives that continued because he chose to help.



THE SLOVAK ARTIST WHO SURVIVED AUSCHWITZ

Forced to draw for Mengele, Feld never lost his courage, compassion, or humanity. All fifteen children he hid beneath the barracks survived.

“ Now I can die.”

FRANK LOWY

From Fiľakovo to the World

Survival did not mean that life returned to what it had been.

For many Jewish survivors, coming home meant confronting the absence of almost everyone they had known.

Frank Lowy experienced that loss while still a child.

He grew up in the southern Slovak town of Fiľakovo, helping in his mother's grocery shop, playing football with friends and living within a close-knit Jewish community.
He was eleven when the Holocaust shattered that world.

After southern Slovakia came under Hungarian rule, conditions for Jews deteriorated rapidly. Frank's family eventually fled to Budapest.

His father was arrested by the Nazis at a railway station and later murdered in Auschwitz.
Frank, his mother and his siblings survived by hiding and moving repeatedly.
After the war, he returned to Fiľakovo.

But the community he remembered had almost disappeared.
Home was filled with the absence of those who would never return.

At fifteen, Frank left Europe for Palestine. A few years later, he fought in Israel's War of Independence before emigrating to Australia.
There he began again.

Together with his family, he eventually built Westfield, which grew from modest beginnings into one of the world's largest shopping-center businesses.
He also became an influential figure in Australian football and played an important role in the country's return to the FIFA World Cup.

Yet extraordinary success never erased Fiľakovo from his life.

Frank Lowy returned repeatedly to the town of his childhood.

He helped restore its neglected Jewish cemetery, created memorials to the destroyed synagogue and Jewish community, and worked to ensure that the people who had once lived there would not disappear from memory.

Hear Frank Lowy tell it in his own words in our powerful interview - a deeply personal reflection on childhood, loss, survival, and the extraordinary journey that led him to become one of the most remarkable Slovaks of all time.

THE SLOVAK BOY WHO LOST EVERYTHING

AND BUILT ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMPANIES



As a child in Fiľakovo, Frank Lowy lost his home, family world, and community to the Holocaust.

After surviving war and displacement, he rebuilt his life abroad and went on to create Westfield – while never forgetting the Jewish community that shaped him.

SUCCESS NEVER ERASED HIS ROOTS.

FRANK LOWY

A SPECIAL INTERVIEW

First public release

A powerful conversation on memory, survival, heritage, and legacy.



Released as part of the Remembering Jewish Slovakia campaign

WHAT REMAINS

The world described in these pages cannot be reconstructed.

Too many people were murdered.

Too many families disappeared.

Too many communities never returned.

And yet Jewish Slovakia did not vanish completely.

Its presence remains in Bratislava and Košice, in Fiľakovo and Pezinok, in towns and villages across the country.

It survives in synagogues and cemeteries.

In family photographs and religious books.

In architecture, businesses and works of art.

In scholarship and traditions carried across oceans.

It survives in the descendants of those who left Slovakia and built new lives in Israel, the United States, Australia and elsewhere.

And it survives in the stories we choose to remember.



MAY WE NEVER FORGET

Eighty-five years ago, the Jewish Codex came into force in the Slovak State. Five years ago, the Slovak government formally apologized.

REMEMBERING JEWISH SLOVAKIA

The history of Slovakia cannot be told without the history of its Jewish communities.

For nearly a thousand years, Jewish families lived here, prayed here, worked here, studied here, created here and raised generations here.

They were rabbis and merchants.

Doctors and industrialists.

Artists and athletes.

Teachers, parents and children.

Their communities helped shape the country Slovakia became.

The Holocaust destroyed much of that extraordinary world, but destruction should not be the only way we remember it. We should remember the life that came before it.

The communities that flourished.

The ideas they produced.

The buildings they created.

The families they raised.

The courage with which individuals resisted.
And the lives survivors rebuilt afterward.

To remember Jewish Slovakia is therefore to remember both what was lost and what once lived so richly.

It is to recognize Jewish history for what it has always been: an inseparable part of Slovakia's story.

May we never forget.

ABOUT GLOBAL SLOVAKIA

PEOPLE HERITAGE CONNECTIONS

Global Slovakia is a nonprofit organization founded by two Slovak scholars and writers with a passion for sharing Slovakia's remarkable heritage with the world. Through its rich culture and fascinating history, we bring Slovakia closer to people around the globe.

BOOKS
Stories that bring history to life

EDUCATION
Language courses, lectures and learning programs

COMMUNITY
A global network of Slovak descendants and friends

TRAVEL
Meaningful journeys to Slovakia

HERITAGE LIVES ON



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REMEMBERING JEWISH SLOVAKIA

May we never forget.

Remembering the people, places, and stories that shaped Jewish life in Slovakia.

SCAN TO WATCH
FRANK LOWY INTERVIEW

www.globalslovakia.com