

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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ROBERT GÁL, PART 2: "JEW GAL"

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Dear Peter and friends:

Fedor Gál's Jewishness played an integral part in the hate campaign designed to discredit both him and the politics he stood for.

"Jew Gál, Jew Gál," repeats his son Robert. "It even sounded good. Two short words, a consonant on each end with a vowel in the middle."

Gál's looks and demeanor didn't help much, Robert says. He sort of looked like a devil, with his scraggly salt-and-pepper beard and sharp features. He used foreign words and even pronounced Slovak words differently at times, such as saying "ne" (Czech for no; pronounced "neh"), instead of the softer, Slovak "nie" (pron. "nyeh"). He wrinkled his brow when he talked and squinted his eyes. He wore sweaters instead of suits (The "sweater problem" I mentioned last time).

"So that Gál was a symbol of something bad, something evil, and then people got to Judaism as such, and to the anti-semitism that was heard during those nationalistic demonstrations," Robert says. "That included that Jews are controlling the world, are connected to millionaires in America, and most importantly connected to Prague and the federal government [a bad thing]. And then these Jews were linked with the political parties and movements that had good relations with Prague, and that was mostly VPN. And then the problem reached another dimension, when they began attacking VPN."

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Dagmar Obereigner is an Institute fellow studying political and social change in Czechoslovakia.

VPN (Slovak political movement Verejnost Proti Nasiliu, Public Against Violence in English) even was nicknamed "Jewish VPN."

Ironically, Fedor Gál doesn't even feel Jewish, in the religious sense. He was born a Jew, but not raised as one. "What kind of Jew am I?" he says. "I've never had a religious upbringing." Until he was hit with anti-semitism, he never talked about being Jewish. Because of what's happened to him, he now does. But he hasn't become religious. He hasn't been moved to seek out books about Judaism, or to visit any organized Jewish community.

Robert is half-Jewish. Like most people here, he grew up without any religion. He said he found out about his background when he was about 13. Robert remembers his grandmother teaching him about Jewish literature and trying to instill in him pride about his heritage. He began reading Thomas Mann and Bernard Malamud. He considers himself an atheist but wants to learn more about Judaism someday. He views it as a big research project. He wants to systematically go down each library shelf, reading one book after another on the subject.

#### NO MORE TABOOS

The Gál family seldom talked about religion at home, including the fact that three-fourths of the family on Fedor's side died in a concentration camp. But when Fedor Gál's Jewishness became fodder for the media, the family suddenly found out more about his past than he'd ever divulged. The biggest shock came during a television program. During a popular weekly political talk show called "What the Week Brought," Jozef Kučerák, Gál's successor as VPN presidium chairman, announced to millions of viewers that Fedor Gál was born in a box in the Terezín (Theresienstadt) concentration camp in northern Bohemia. Kučerák apparently was responding to a critic alleging something like Gál having dictatorial tendencies. Robert thinks that by revealing this intensely private matter, Kučerák was trying to show that Gál was a humane, sensitive person who didn't have dictatorial tendencies.

Robert remembers having drinks with friends sometime later in a Bratislava pub. He had bought a glass of wine for a fellow who didn't have enough money for one. The person didn't know who Robert was. "And as a reward for the 2 deciliters of wine, he told me a joke in which he called my father a Jew in a box. That joke apparently was going around. That phrase, Jew in a box, was going around.

"Kučerák said something on TV that he meant well, but those people in Slovakia were so heated up about my father already" that they immediately latched onto it, he said. "In pubs people were chuckling into their beer and saying Jew in a box this and Jew in a box that. No sensitivity, no understanding, no empathy. It's a difficult problem, because I think that politicians' private lives and private affairs should not be discussed on television."

Robert says he'd sort of known before how and where his father was born. But it was never talked about at home. He lets out a small, bitter laugh. "It was almost taboo. That was that insane paradox, that for 21 years -- that's how old I was then -- we in the family never really talked about it, and suddenly the whole republic knows about it. About something that in fact was nearly taboo in our own family. Insane. There were so many paradoxes. I sometimes simply did not comprehend."

### LOSING PERSPECTIVE

Robert had been studying sociology until then. He stopped. "I simply lost perspective. I used to think that I understood roughly what was going on in this society, but today I can't say that. I've completely lost perspective. I don't understand the society in which I live. I don't understand. I don't understand and worry that I will never understand it again."

But then he thinks about it, and he says it's OK. "Every philosopher can, in my opinion, began philosophizing only at the moment when he realizes that he doesn't understand something."

Because Robert doesn't "look Jewish," he wasn't harassed in high school. He recalls that for four years classmates "kept destroying" the young man who sat next to him (He did look Jewish but denied that he was). They did let Robert know they had something on him.

He says anti-Jewish and anti-black jokes traveled around the school but blames them partially on a "warped time," says they were a way to let off steam. But he didn't understand the harsher things, like when classmates made faces and made fun of the victims when the students had to watch films about Nazi concentration camps.

He says maybe that's why he was drawn to philosophy. "There was a lot of things during those years I didn't understand," including being taught that through some "rule of law of historical development, humankind must get from capitalism to Communism."

Robert has no happy memories of school, calling his education "brainwashing."

I ask him what living under socialism cost him.

"It took time from me," he answered. "It took from me the possibility to live more fully. For example, I couldn't travel." He also lacked good cooperation from teachers, and the ability to really analyze issues that concerned him. "I had to always be a bit afraid in front of people to talk about certain issues. And I never believed everything a person said."

The lack of trust was what bothered him the most. "I was most sorry that people didn't behave naturally toward one another. That two-facedness. ... People didn't know what it was not to be

afraid. Everyone was afraid. Everyone was afraid together.

"That created a psychosis of fear, of something unknown. A certain `it.` And that `it` was what manipulated the whole society, with each person inside from some unknown point. ... All my life, I had a feeling that I had no chance to get out of that cycle of all those various manipulations."

Some of his friends thought it made sense to join the Communist Party to effect change from within, but Robert never did. He never thought a person could do anything about the "colossal nonsense of socialism."

#### **WE WERE ALL IN IT TOGETHER**

He notes that when "time was stopped" under socialism, there was a feeling that people were in it together. They lived in "unwritten consensus" that they all thought the same thing about the government.

"All of us under socialism, when we walked in the streets, at least the vast majority of us, were sure that ... the whole of Communism was one big mess and those bigwigs above were idiots, etc. We were convinced that the vast majority of people that walked around us, even if we didn't discuss it, that they thought roughly the same thing."

During the hard-line "normalization" of the 1970s, "we realized that we're normal. The other guys are bad, we're good."

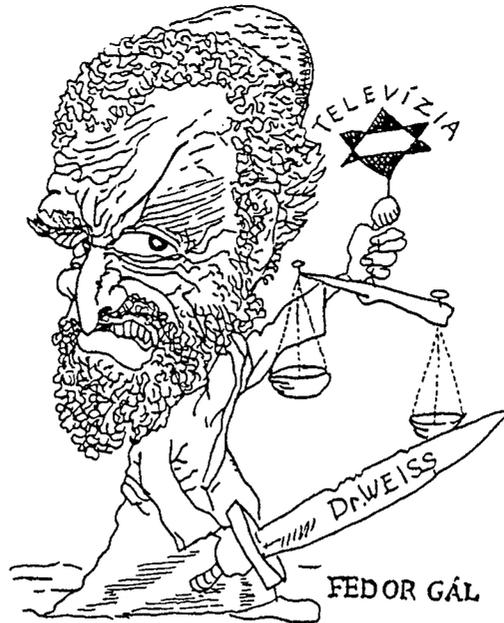
I say to him that the unity was an artificial one and disappeared soon after the revolution. Robert agrees, but he says he misses it. "I'm sad that that person with whom before the revolution I could normally talk about how those Communists are idiots, I can't talk with that person today about how that [Slovak Prime Minister] Mečiar is an idiot. Because he's a Mečiarite."

We talk about how his father recently has begun saying that for the first time, he feels different than other Slovaks. Robert says he himself has always been an introvert and has always felt a bit different, but for his extroverted father, this mental isolation is new.

Why shouldn't his father feel different when his nation spits on him? he asks. But there may be another reason, he adds. "And that was a thing that I also was taken aback by, that I've also thought about a lot lately. That a lot of the people with whom you could normally debate before the revolution -- basically they were our friends, some family friends -- after the revolution turned into `big Slovaks,' big nationalists, and suddenly you can't talk with those people about normal things.

"They suddenly see the whole world through the optic of their Slovak-ness. So, are they the same people, or are they different people? How is it possible that now suddenly the same people who

ŠANCA PRE IZRAEL  
VOLTE VPN



ŽIDOVSKÝ POSLANCI ZA YPN

GÁL-ŠEBEJ-FELDEK-ZAJAC  
ŠTRASSER-GINDL-MISTRIKOVÁ  
BÚTORA-BÚTOROVÁ-ČIČOV ZAĽ

*One of the caricatures of Fedor Gál distributed in Bratislava. It says "A chance for Israel. Vote VPN." Under the likeness of Gal is a list of allegedly "Jewish members of Parliament representing VPN." Robert Gal says probably only a couple of those people actually are Jewish. The "Dr. Weiss" written in the sword must be Peter Weiss, head of the revamped Slovak Communist Party.*

before knew how to talk about philosophy and about certain eternal questions suddenly are so petty that they're concerned about such things? Or is it not pettiness?"

Robert Gál says the people who hurt his family "didn't even know what they were saying, basically, they didn't comprehend totally what was happening. They really let themselves get blinded by the demagoguery from the media. They were defenseless against it. All

their lives they were used to accepting what they were told."

He said when he first saw Mečiar on television, "I believed him too. He's really a charismatic person."

And a demagogue, Robert says. That's how you get at people after a revolution is over, when that first emotional wave of that revolution subsides. "The only way is to tell the people what they want to hear, and what isn't true. And that's called demagoguery. And that demagoguery continues today."

Robert said he consoles himself with the knowledge that the time for people like Mečiar has passed. He predicted that even if Mečiar won the June elections (which he went on to do), his era would end within four years. A solid opposition would be in place by then.

Robert voted for the Civic Democratic Union, one of the remnants of the now-defunct VPN. The pro-reform, pro-federation party did not make it into Parliament. Robert had hoped the party would squeak by and get at least the needed 5 percent of the vote. I called him after the results were in. He said he was shocked and upset.

#### JUST LIKE OLD TIMES

His father, smiling but probably not joking, told me later, "We'll start listening to Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America again, just like during old times."

Robert says that despite the hardships, being part of VPN's leadership was good for his father. It helped him get to know himself better. He met many new people, made new friends. And what about Robert? He thinks he got something out of that era too, if he looks at it philosophically, from a distance.

"It forced me to have certain contemplations about life."

I ask him what he wants to do in the future.

"I'll do my work; I'd like to write books -- I'd like to write a few good books; I'd like to learn to speak English; I'd like to see something of the world, experience something."

He predicts that his society will "gradually begin to cleanse itself of its impurities, gradually new generations will take the place of old ones, and the new generations will be less stupid and less weighed down by Communism and more free.

"I think that the Slovaks and the Czechs are a nation that's very hard-working, in short that the state can be a developed state based on market economy and that spiritual values will be preserved at the same time. ..."

Fedor Gál says he has no plans to return to politics. Good

politicians win, he said. "And I lost." But he hasn't exactly retreated to academia. He lectures. He appears on television as an authority on the Slovak situation. He says writing is a tension-releaser for him. He has written a book about his time at the top, and co-authored two others on the Czech-Slovak situation. Robert tells me his mother also has written a book, about how she lived through the past two years. I start laughing, and Robert joins me when I then say it appears he'll have to write a book too.

I guess that's it for this story. But Fedor Gal no longer is the only Slovak immigrant in the Czech Republic. There now are many other stories of Slovak emigration, although no emigre has been as politically important and as Jewish as Gal. He reports that this summer, people from Slovakia -- intellectuals, top professionals -- for the first time began asking him for help with housing, employment, opening a bank account. It may seem like just a few dozen families, he says. But calls them part of Slovakia's "spiritual wealth."

The Slovak newcomers say they feel welcome here. Here in exile.

All the best,



Dagmar