

# Shoshana Zachor (Renata Hönigsberová)

*Prominent Figures in Zionist Scouting  
and Jewish Youth Movements*

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Try and find the good and nice  
in everything

*Shoshana Zachor (Renata Hönigsberová)*



*Renata Hönigsberová / Shoshana Zachor*

I go to Israel to interview former Czechoslovaks who have gone through an education in some of the Zionist youth movements which were often espousing Scouting. Each of these movements gathers historical documents on their activities either in the archives of the kibbutzim and moshavim on the construction of which their members participated in or in institutions designated for keeping similar materials, such as museums or a variety of documentation centres.

One such centre, Beit Ha-edut (The Testimony House in Hebrew) is located in Nir Galim in the South of Israel. I was very grateful for the opportunity to go through the archive, because in the early days of my investigation I hadn't known virtually anything about the Bnei Akiva movement (Sons of Akiva). The Sons of Akiva became a corporate member of the Association of Scouts and Guides of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1932, and I was looking for details about members of Czech or Slovak origin and their activities between the two World War.<sup>1</sup> My guide through the extensive, largely Hebrew heaps of papers was Yael Diamant, whose ancestors came to Palestine from Germany and Slovakia; and those from Slovakia were behind the creation of the Bnei Akiva organisation in Nitra. After some time, she asked whether I would like to meet with a living witness, a former member of the Nitra group, and I gladly said yes. Yael took care of the formalities and I thus had the opportunity to meet an amazing person, Mrs. Shoshana Zachor, who, thanks to TV broadcasting, is known to virtually all Israel.

## Childhood in Nitra

Shoshana Zachor was born in Nitra, into a middle-class Jewish family, on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1925 as Renata Hönigsberová. There were total of six children in the family: Shoshana's twin Hana, brother Chaim, and three other sisters, Frída, Lea and Sára. Another important member of the family was aunt Gusta Reichav, who was active in the Zionist movement and maintained contact with its top officials.

At the time, the Hönigsbers owned a shop with leather products, and later also a canned fish factory, so they were financially secured. The problem was elsewhere: Although Shoshana's father had lived on the territory of Czechoslovakia for more than thirty years, he still did not have citizenship. His daughter never overcame this obvious injustice:

*“Though my father had been in Nitra for over thirty years, we never got national citizenship. We were Jewish. There were lots of Jews without citizenship in Slovakia.”*

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<sup>1</sup> The leading ideologist of the Bnei Akiva movement, Moše Jurovič has defined the connection of religious life and Scouting as follows: “Studying the Torah occupies the first place in our work, because you cannot live a life according to the Torah without the knowledge of the Torah. In Scouting we see the means of implementation of strict discipline, coming closer to nature, getting rid of the bad consequences of urban life and education for work.” In: Protokol des Kinus Arzi Bnei Akiva, 30/7—2/8/1936, Sobrance.



*The Hönigsbers family, from the left: sister Hilda (she changed her name to Hana in Israel), dad, mum, Renata (Shoshana). Undated.*

Initially it did not matter, but later on it did and the consequences were dramatic.

Shoshana and her twin sister Hana attended primary school and then reformed realgymnasium secondary school in Nitra. Although Czechoslovakia did not treat her family well, she loved the president T. G. Masaryk when she was a little girl. It was, after all, nothing unusual among the Jews then and an echo of this sentiment manifested itself more than seventy-five years later: when I brought her a book with Masaryk's picture on the cover, it brought a tear to Shoshana's eye...

## **Overnight exile**

One autumn Friday night a commando of guards invaded the Hönigsbers home and gave the family ten minutes to pack and get in a car. It was November 1938 and the Hönigsbers found themselves in the role of outlaws, along with thousands of other Slovak Jews who were driven out to the so-called no man's land on the newly established Slovak-Hungarian border. Czechoslovakia in its original form no longer existed, after the Vienna arbitration

proceedings Slovakia had to give up a portion of its borderland to Hungary<sup>2</sup> (similarly, the Czechs had to surrender the Sudetenland). Among the first victims were those who lacked Czechoslovak citizenship. The Hönigsbers were among them.

It was not their first encounter with anti-semitism. Once before they have become victims of a pogrom just after the First World War:

*“In 1918, when my parents lived in Prievidza, their house was plundered. They took everything. That is why my mother took my little brother, who was about one-year-old at the time, and two more little children and ran away to Nitra, because she had relatives there. That was the first time when they had to run away. That is our fate.”<sup>3</sup>*

But in 1938 the situation was a lot worse: there was nowhere and no one to run to. The van took them and others to the Hungarian border and the guards drove the Hönigsbers into an abandoned barn. Because of the speed in which everything happened, Shoshana had nothing more on her than several layers of clothing, no food, not to mention other things:

*“We did not have anything to eat and we were cold. I was starving and I went to sleep. When I was sleeping, I felt something on my face, I grabbed it, and it was a mouse. But I was so apathetic that I just said to myself, mouse, mouse, so what, and I slept again.*

Paradoxically, the Hönigsbers met with the milk of human kindness of the Hungarian police officers who shared bread with them. After a few days, however, the situation became pretty rough. The exiles in the newly-created space were helped by all the Jewish communities from all over Slovakia, the Scout Zionist organisation Hashomer Hacair provided camping equipment such as tents, field kitchens, sleeping bags, but it was of little use as it was November and the weather was miserable and there were no adequate facilities, no roof over their head and the young children in particular were suffering.

For Shoshana, all this was very painful: she was Slovak and she had done nothing wrong. And there is one more experience she took from this, albeit tragicomic, she never got rid of her mice phobia. She used to say that when he sees a mouse, she has the kind of reaction others would have when facing a living dinosaur.

Although the then attempt to solve the Jewish question did not work out very well and the Jews gradually returned to their oftentimes looted homes, it was more than clear what direction Slovakia would take. There were no prospects, no future for the Jewish.

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2 On the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1938 during the first Vienna arbitration, it was decided to surrender parts of southern and eastern Slovakia (approximately 12 000 km<sup>2</sup>) to Hungary. Two days later the Slovak Government decided to expel a part of the Jews to the no man's land in the new borderland area.

3 It was the riots on 1<sup>st</sup>—4<sup>th</sup> November 1918, when a penal military unit had to be called to stop the looting in Prievidza.



*The Bnei Akiva group in Nitra, to which Shoshana belonged. Shoshana is not in the picture. 1938.*

## Member of Bnei Akiva

Shoshana was a member of the aforementioned Bnei Akiva movement. This organisation differed quite a lot from other Jewish youth associations in regards to the issue of Zionism; its members were mostly deeply religious people and the generational clash typical for other movements was not present in such an escalated form. Actually, it would have been quite impossible—there they complied with the Old Testament commandment: “Honour thy father and thy mother.” The aim was the preparation for the departure to Palestine where young Jews would build their old-new homeland:

*“In Nitra, Jews were quite orthodox. But our parents were open-minded and so they allowed us to go to Bnei Akiva, it was not an issue. We were learning Hebrew language, singing Hebrew songs, we were a tight-knit group. And we also learned to be proud of being Jewish. Torah and work. That is what I lived and what I did. I went to a kibbutz. All of my friends who stayed in Nitra died. All of them! Only my husband fled to Hungary.”*

Shoshana took the preparation for the journey to Palestine very seriously: as already mentioned, she was learning Hebrew at Bnei Akiva, but also physical work. It was a necessity: the immigration certificates issued by the British authorities which facilitated the transfer to Palestine were given preferentially to those who had certificate of completion of manual labour training. In 1940, she attended a Hachshara programme; an agricultural training camp organised by the Bnei Akiva movement under the Zobor Hill near Nitra. Under the guidance

of instructors, twenty young people were learning agricultural skills, i.e. skills that were most needed for the future life in the land of Israel. Shoshana stayed for an entire year: After a frustrating experience in November when she came to school and found that along with her twin Hana she had been removed from the class register, she had an argument with the headmaster and refused to go back to the secondary school. She preferred to focus on the activities she deemed to be meaningful. And preparing for life in the land of Israel certainly had a meaning.

## Meeting with Shmuel

She also met Shmuel, with whom she then spent the rest of her life in Israel, in Bnei Akiva. He was her madrich, i.e. the leader of the group. Then his name was Alexander Weiss, he worked as a treasurer at a branch of the movement, and although he was five years older, Shoshana liked him immediately. He was an altruist who always cared more about the wellbeing of others rather than his own and he was regarded as a man of high moral qualities. The relationship was gradually developing, and as Shoshana later recalled, she got her first kiss earlier than the immigration certificate to Palestine... When she started preparing for departure, Shmuel could do no more than to wish her a safe journey, because he was in charge of taking care of the family and he couldn't leave to Palestine. He got there much later, after the war, however, with a detour to Bergen-Belsen. Fortunately, he survived.



Shmuel Zachor when his name was Alexander Weiss. 1941.

## Aliyah means to leave

Aliyah is a Hebrew term for immigration to Palestine (or Israel) which is used to this day. The original meaning of this word is “ascent” or “going up” in the Zionists context, however, it means leaving to Eretz Israel, the land of Israel. In many families, sons and daughters leaving to Palestine represented an absolute controversy; a clash between generations and opinions. In Shoshana's family this was not the case at all. In May 1941, when they got the news that Shoshana and her twin sister Hana received the British certificates necessary for the entry into the country, the whole family was happy, parents included. Anti-Semitism was on the rise:

*“In 1940, it was very hard. We always felt that we are less than others. When I went out in the streets, I felt inferior. And the Slovaks knew very well how to do that. But we thought that it must be that way. Once I got a beaten up. But I have always fought back. Always!”*

Shoshana felt no fear because she would be leaving her native home and home country, because it was clear what could happen. Even the greatest optimists forecast nothing good for the Jews in Slovakia and there were more and more of those who forecast a downright tragedy. Moreover, for Shoshana as a member of a Zionist youth group, the land of Israel meant heaven on Earth. There was no reason to stay, especially when some of her siblings have already got into Palestine.

## The second Masada or headfirst into trouble

*“And then it was like a miracle: In 1940, me and my sister were given the certificates. We were 120 children and we travelled for 12 days and 12 nights. Bratislava, Budapest, Constanța, Istanbul, Lebanon, Palestine. And it was a happy company. It was just children. We weren’t aware of what is happening with us. We just knew that we were going to Eretz Israel.”*

In the middle of the war, the Zionists had very little chance to get to the land of Israel, so for those who managed, it seemed like a small miracle. I asked all the people I interviewed about their point of view on this. At that time, faith was crucial for Shoshana. For the Jews coming from an Orthodox background, coming to Palestine meant return to a land that God has promised to their fathers, so they were coming home, in a sense. So I was of course interested in her answer. And then, when I asked about the first impression, she surprised me:

*“The first impression was very sad. I’ll tell you why. My brother Chaim was already here. And at that point, Rommel had already had all the remainder of Egypt. We were awaiting attack, all the Technion students in Haifa were digging trenches on Mount Carmel. And it was called Masada. It will be the second Masada. We will not give up to Rommel. And I called Chaim: We are here. Chaim: Who? We, your sisters Hana and Rena. He: Little girls, why did you come? This is our end and maybe it will be your end too!”<sup>4</sup>*

The story of the modern Masada has historical roots more than two thousand years ago, when the Jewish defended their fortress before Roman invaders until the bitter end; rather than giving up, they committed a mass suicide. The term “modern” Masada appeared in the times of the Second World War, when Jews were prepared to make the same sacrifice should Africa Korps of Erwin Rommel get into Palestine, not to give up and fight until the last man standing. Fortunately, Rommel never got to Palestine, but those trenches on Mount Carmel are visible to this day.

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4 At the time of the Egyptian campaign of Afrika Korps led by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, there was a plan to occupy Palestine and exterminate the Palestinian Jews. The Nazi group “Egypt”, which prepared the holocaust of Middle East Jewry, should have participated in the plan. This danger lasted until November 1942, when Rommel was finally defeated in the battle of El Alamein and the Palestine campaign was thus cancelled.

## Make the desert blossom

The name of this subchapter is also the name of a chapter in the book which Shoshana Zachor wrote and published at the occasion of her ninetieth birthday. The book is called “Anachnu Po” (Hebrew for “We Are Still Here”), and Shoshana describes the Holocaust experience, but also her part in the building of the Israeli State from complete scratch, and her life after that.

For a while she stayed in Rosh HaNikra on the border with Lebanon, and then went to a kibbutz in Gush Etzion:

*“At that point, Gush Etzion was just mountains and stones. Nothing more. It was very hard. We were in tents, it was cold and we washed in cold water. None of us caught cold or bronchitis, we were all healthy. I was already an enthusiast reader, but we had no electricity, only kerosene lamps. And so I made gloves from an old blanket, so that my hands wouldn’t freeze when I was holding a book. That is how I read. And I remember what I was reading, it was a book by Romain Rolland. Again they thought that I am not normal.”*

But Shoshana never complained. After all, her dream came true, the Bnei Akiva motto is “Torah V’Avodah”, i.e. Torah and work; we will pray and we will work. She and her friends were happy where they were, and for the time being, they didn’t want anything else. They didn’t get much information about what was going on in Europe.



A letter from Alexander Weiss (future husband of Renata Hönigsberová) sent via the Red Cross to Renata to Palestine in 1943.

## Inferno

As the war was coming to an end, terrible news was coming too. Gradually, the public was becoming aware of what Hitter actually meant by “the final solution of the Jewish question”, and that he was absolutely ruthless. The Hönigsbers were no exception. The bearer of bad news was the only surviving cousin:

*“My oldest sister Sára was married off to a pious boy. He didn’t believe that it was right to go to Israel, he believed we had to wait for the Mashiah.<sup>5</sup> We shouldn’t interfere with the work of God. Only God can lead us to Israel, there everything will be all right. And this is why a lot of pious people died.*

5 Mashiah is Hebrew for Messiah.

*My parents and my sister with her husband and their five children stayed in Nitra until October 1944. And when there was the uprising, Eichmann ordered all the Jews that have stayed in Slovakia deported. So they took my whole family straight to Auschwitz, straight to the crematorium.”*

Only bit after bit was Shoshana learning what precisely had happened in Nitra. The aforementioned aunt Gusta Reichav, an active Zionist was trying to get certificates to leave Slovakia for the whole family, but the certificates never arrived. Later on, they couldn't go anywhere at all. An aryанизator was installed to the Hönigsbers factory, and he hid the family in a bunker, but only to disclose their whereabouts to the Germans. It was easy money for him... The Germans broke into the bunker on a Friday night, which was their favourite thing to do, as they knew that the Jews would be celebrating Sabbath:

*“We can say they were lucky in Auschwitz, that they weren't put in the barracks. They went straight to the gas chamber. And how do I know this? My cousin came back. She was with them, but she came back. Now I am saying they were lucky, but... I have had dream about my mother for many years, as she was scratching the wall, crying that she wants out! She wants out! I was devastated!”*



*A commemorative plaque for Shoshana's parents, sister and her five children which she had had installed in the synagogue in Kfar Saba.*

Then, something inside Shoshana was broken. She couldn't answer the frequently asked question where was God when millions of Jews were dying and her attitude to faith has been distant and lukewarm since then. God lost his firm place in her world. She has never forgotten her parents, her sister Sára and her five children. Everyone who visits the synagogue in Kfar Saba where Shoshana lived the last years of her life can find a commemorative plaque with the names of those she loved and whom she wept for until the last days of her life.

## New beginnings

Fortunately, her boyfriend Shmuel, the madrich from the Nitra group of Bnei Akiva, appeared in Palestine. In 1943, he ran away with his little sister to Hungary, where he was hiding at a Christian family and was using false ID. But his identity was revealed, so he had to flee again and lived underground until he found a group which intermediated help to Jewish migrants in Budapest. It was the Aid and Rescue Committee led by Rudolf Kastner<sup>6</sup> and one of its many

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Israel Kastner (1906, Kluž—15<sup>th</sup> March 1957, Tel Aviv) was a representative of the Aid and Rescue Committee called the Va'ada. This group was helping Jewish refugees escape from Germany, and later, after the German occupation of Hungary in 1944, it organized the escape of Hungarian Jews. One of the rescue activities was the plan of escape of 1685 Jews to Switzerland by the so called Kastner train. After the war, Kastner moved to Palestine. In



*The Zachor family: from the left son Eli, Shoshana, daughter Michal, Shmuel. Circa 1960.*

activities was the so-called Kastner train. This train took him to Switzerland—but with a detour to the extermination camp at Bergen-Belsen—and Shmuel and other 1685 Jews whose lives were hanging by a thread got freed. In September 1945, he made a sudden appearance in Gush Etzion and then there was nothing standing in the way of a wedding. Together, they accepted the surname Zachor, Hebrew version of Shmuel's original surname Weiss, i.e. White.

Shoshana started to study, she worked as a teacher in a kindergarten, and Shmuel remained in the army, he served in the IDF, the Israeli Defence Forces. They had two children, and when one looks at the family picture of the celebration of Shoshana's ninetieth birthday, it takes some time to count all the family members.

Another joyful event Shoshana mentioned was the establishment of the State of Israel:

*"There was nothing more beautiful. All of our dreams have come true! We were happy. But one day, there was happiness, and the next day we went to a war. When Ben-Gurion declared independence, the Arabs came from seven countries. Shmuel was a soldier and I was in Haganah. Shmuel was in Tel Aviv—Jaffa. And in Jaffa, there were the Arabs."*<sup>7</sup>

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1952, he was accused of collaborating with the Nazis and later on he was the target of radical group's Lechi attempt on his life, as a result of which he died.

<sup>7</sup> At the turn of April and May of 1948, during the time of the first Israel-Arab war, the aim of the so-called Hametz Operation was to conquer the territory around the city of Jaffa, which was controlled by the Arabs.





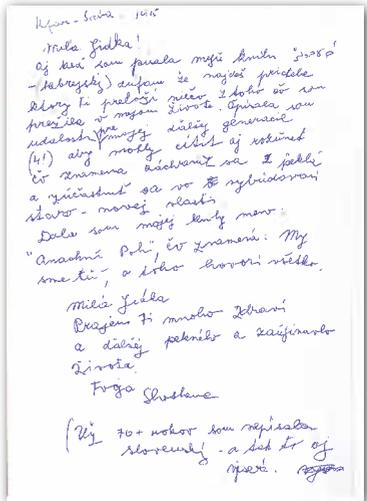
A picture of us together. From the left Shoshana Zachor, Yael Diamant, the author. May 2014.

## Conclusion

I will never be grateful enough to my Israeli friend Yael for introducing me to Shoshana Zachor. I remember all of our meetings vividly: when I saw her for the first time, she said she hasn't spoken Slovak for seventy years, but she would try again. Her opinions were impeccable and the depth of her life experience was reflected in every sentence she uttered:

*„Anachnu Po. We are still here. And everything is a coincidence. Even me being here is a coincidence. And that's why when I get up in the morning, open the windows and see blue skies, I know it's my day. You need to pick what is nice and good from everything.“*

I went to see Shoshana every time I came to Israel. Despite the fairly significant age difference we understood each other very well. We last met in November 2015 and there were no indications that this would be our last meeting. My friend Shoshana Zachor died on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2016, and as the Jewish say, may she be of blessed memory.



Dedication in the book "Anachnu Po" (We Are Still Here). November 2015.

In the article I used excerpts from the interviews with Shoshana Zachor from May 2014 and January 2015. Other sources are given in the footnotes.

Translated by Tereza Kopřivová