

Oscar Sladek

PREŠOV, CZECHOSLOVAKIA - 1935



Oskar Štaub (now Oscar Sladek) is born to Sarlota, “Irene,” and Bendrich, “Frici” Štaub on March 18th, 1935. Frici is a talented violinist, conductor, and composer and he and Irene own a luxury goods store in Prešov, Czechoslovakia. In 1939, Czechoslovakia is broken up; parts of it are annexed by Germany, Poland, and Hungary, and under the leadership of Jozef Tiso, the Slovak Republic comes into being. Although an independent nation, between 1939 and 1945 Slovakia is essentially a client state of Germany.

In 1941, under the new Slovak government, “The Jewish Codex” is passed. These laws place restrictions on Jews owning property, working certain jobs, holding bank accounts, and gathering in large groups. Jews are also required to wear a badge with a yellow Star of David.

The Štaubs are in danger of losing their business under the Codex restrictions, so a friend, a local Christian judge, Dr. Jozef Šolc, suggests that they transfer ownership of the shop to his sister Maria. Maria’s ownership is in name only, and under this arrangement the Štaubs are able to keep their livelihood. The Štaubs and Frici’s parents are forced to move out of their homes, and they move in together into the maid’s quarters behind Frici’s parent’s home.

Between March and October 1942, the Slovak government begins deporting Slovak Jews to labor camps in Slovakia and from there on to concentration camps in German-occupied Poland. Local authorities—the Hlinka Guard—periodically move through Prešov arresting Jews for these deportations. Whenever these roundups are about to happen, Judge Šolc warns the Štaubs to go into hiding. The Štaubs hide in a hole dug beneath the floors of one their Christian friends’ houses; when the round up is over, the friends tap on the floor to let them know it is safe to emerge.

As the roundups become more intense, Irene and Frici decide to send Oscar away to Hungary. Across the border in Kassa, Hungary, life for Jews is better. Hungary has also passed a series of laws discriminating against its Jewish citizens, similar to those in Slovakia. However, in 1943, Hungary still refuses to deport its Jewish population to German concentration camps.

Oscar is smuggled across the border in spring 1943 and lives in Kassa with his aunt’s family. While there, he goes to school, practices and performs music, and participates in Jewish communal and religious life. Then in March 1944, he watches as the Nazis arrive in Hungary. He insists on returning to his parents and is smuggled back to Prešov in April.

The Štaubs’ friend, Judge Šolc, provides them with forged baptismal certificates that include Christian names. However, because too many people in Prešov know their real names, the Štaubs decide to leave Prešov. They settle in Mikuláš, and one day in August, they watch as the Slovak partisans drive the Slovak government and their German collaborators out of the city. This uprising is precipitated by the approach of the Soviets. In response, German troops move into Slovakia.

As the German army moves closer, the Štaubs travel further into the mountains to the town of Bobrovček. There, they live in temporary tranquility. Oscar learns to ride horses and makes friends with

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the partisans stationed nearby. As the Nazis once again advance, the Štaubs and the partisans flee. The Štaubs travel into the Tatra mountains on foot to a small shepherd's cabin. The cabin has no running water or electricity and is already inhabited by twelve refugees. For two months, they live in this cramped space, depending upon a local teenager from Bobrovček, who was paid to bring them supplies.

On December 25, 1944, a partisan rushes to tell them that the Nazis have started a sweep of the mountains and the cabin is no longer safe. The Štaubs and some friends quickly leave the cabin and hide overnight in a cave—those who chose to stay behind are taken by the Nazis. Afterwards, the Štaubs and their friends return but finding the cabin has burnt down. They build a makeshift shelter in which they hide with little food or resources, during the coldest winter on record, until March 1945.

The lean-to is discovered by some partisans, and when the partisans decide to head toward the Russian line, they take the Štaubs and their companions along. In the small hours of March 3, 1945, the group reaches the Soviets and freedom. In the town of Žiar, the Štaubs are given food, shelter, and their first warm bath in months.

A few days later, the Štaubs gradually make their way back to liberated Prešov. Judge Šolc and his sister are overjoyed at their return and restore their shop to them. However, the Štaubs decide to move to Kassa, now called Košice. In Košice, the family changes their name to Sladek and set up a new shop. Oscar has his bar mitzvah, and the Sladeks have another baby, a little girl, named Miriam. Miriam is born in 1948—the same year that David Ben-Gurion announces the state of Israel is open to Jewish refugees. The Sladeks file the necessary paperwork, pack their goods, and in May of 1949, begin the journey to Israel. They arrive in Haifa on the first anniversary of Israel's independence, May 14, 1949. Oscar is now fourteen years old.

In Israel, Oscar finishes high school and goes on to join the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), where he serves as musical director and composer for the Northern Command Entertainment Corp. Later he emigrates to Caracas, Venezuela and then to Los Angeles, California, where he becomes an established singer-songwriter and performs in several of Hollywood's top folk clubs. At age 23, he meets his future wife Selma Rosen on a blind date, and they marry soon thereafter. He and Selma eventually move to her hometown of Denver, where they go on to have four children and many more grand- and great-grandchildren. In Colorado, Oscar continues performing: on television, radio, and across the country. He serves as executive director of the Temple Sinai synagogue and other Jewish non-profits. In 1975, at age 40, Oscar begins travelling throughout Colorado, California, and Canada speaking about his experiences during the Holocaust. In 2019 the Governor of Colorado, Jared Polis, gives Oscar an award in recognition of his service to Colorado. Oscar's memoir *Escape to the Tatras* is published in 2022, and, in 2025, Oscar is inducted into the Colorado Authors Hall of Fame.

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