

Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci
Filozofická fakulta

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Magdaléna Stárková

Joseph Wechsberg: Between Ostrava, Vienna and the Whole Wide World

Centrum judaistických studií Kurta a Ursuly Schubertových

Vedoucí diplomové práce: *Prof. PhDr. Ingeborg Fialová, Dr.*

Studijní program: *Judaistika: Dějiny a kultura Židů*

Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma Joseph Wechsberg: Between Ostrava, Vienna and the Whole Wide World vypracovala samostatně s použitím odborné literatury a pramenů, uvedených na seznamu, který tvoří přílohu této práce.

V Olomouci, 13.8.2010

Magdaléna Stárková

Poděkování

Děkuji především Prof. PhDr. Ingeborg Fialové, Dr. Tamási Visimu, Dr. Louise Hecht a celému kolektivu Centra judaistických studií Kurta a Ursuly Schubertových za ochotu, podporu a odborné konzultace, bez kterých by tato práce nemohla vzniknout. Dále děkuji paní Libuši Salomonovičové za pomoc při získávání pramenů a odbornou radu a panu Danielu Wechsbergovi za ochotné zapůjčení archivních rodinných materiálů.

V Olomouci, 10.8.2010

Summary:

Wechsberg is as good as forgotten in the Czech Republic, although he was born and spent his early years in Mährisch Ostrau, today's Ostrava. The aim of the thesis is to introduce Wechsberg not primarily as an author, but mostly as a representative of an Ostravan Jew and give an overview of his childhood in Ostrava including an analysis of their social life, religious life and the identity search so typical for the Jewry of the Czech lands, not forgetting the specifics of Ostrava.

The thesis consists of two parts. First of them is a short biography and a history of the Wechsberg family, as they belonged to the Jewish elite of Ostrava of that time and the family formed Wechsberg's literature to a great degree.

The second part is focused on Wechsberg's autobiography *The Vienna I Knew*. A discussion follows about what is actually Jewish in his personal experience and how he dealt with his own roots and the changing political and social situation. Another thread of discussion will try to formulate Wechsberg's relationship and attitude towards Ostrava, Vienna and other places he lived.

Resumé:

Ačkoli se Joseph Wechsberg narodil v Moravské Ostravě, v České republice je neprávem opomíjen. Záměrem diplomové práce však není představit Wechsberga primárně jako autora, ale spíše jako příklad ostravského Žida a podat tak svědectví o Wechsbergově dětství v Ostravě, včetně analýzy sociální situace, náboženského přesvědčení a hledání vlastní identity. Práce bere v potaz specifika nejen českých Židů, ale především specifika ostravská.

První část diplomové práce zahrnuje krátký životopis Josepha Wechsberga, historii rodiny Wechsbergů a historii ostravských Židů. Není to náhodou, protože tyto tři složky pomohly formovat osobnost Josepha Wechsberga.

Druhá část práce se potom orientuje na Wechsbergovo autobiografické dílo *The Vienna I Knew*, které slouží jako cenný zdroj informací o životě židovské vyšší střední třídy v Ostravě v době Wechsbergova dětství a ranné dospělosti. Na základě Wechsbergovy autobiografie odkrývá autorka práce společenský i rodinný život Wechsbergů a v neposlední řadě i to, jakou roli v jejich životě hrály politické změny, náboženství a místa, která jsou s rodinnou historií spojena.

CONTENTS

1.Introduction

2. The hometown of Wechsberg:

Ostrava and its Jews

2.1. Early history of Jewish settlement

2.2. Modernity on the rise: reforms and changes

2.3. Railway writing history

2.4. The industrial boom

2.5. Early 1900's and the First Czechoslovak Republic: the flourishing Steel Heart

2.6. The Shoah

2.7. The Jews of Ostrava today

3. Tight bonds worlds apart

The Wechsberg family: a short overview

4. Joseph Wechsberg: a short biography

4.1. Early years

4.2. The studies and coming of age

4.3. Professional life and personal life

5. The Vienna he loved and the Ostrava he knew

5.1. Introduction

5.2. *The Vienna I Knew*: a memoir book or an autobiography?

5.3. The identity search

5.4. From Grandfather Wechsberg to sausages and cocoa: Judaism on the crossroads

5.5. From the old monarchy into the new reality: the Wechsbergs between two worlds

5.6. The black and the golden: the image of Ostrava and Vienna

6. Conclusion

Anotace

Literature

1. Introduction

There are many communities that are worth writing about and equally as many authors, there are communities with a rich history of settlement and authors who are more renowned and celebrated. Joseph Wechsberg, however, was born and raised in a young and very dynamic industrial city of Mährisch Ostrau, later Moravská Ostrava and this fact indirectly influenced his work and life. One would argue that it was almost never (with one exception) Ostrava Wechsberg granted his literary attention to, he wrote about Vienna and the glamorous cities and culture of the empire, he colorfully described the gourmet gastronomy, the world of theater and mainly classical music, which was his life-long passion.

In other words, he wrote about all things seemingly worlds apart from a dirty provincial town with a black skyline shaped by heavy industry and coal mining. This, however, might not be completely true. Wechsberg loved Ostrava in the way most Ostravans still see their city; it is a rather distant love-hate relation a bona fide *chachar* has to his city. Exactly the people from a shabby province tend to be the ones to look up to glamorous capitols the most, exactly the way Wechsberg did. This, however, shouldn't be an accusation of Wechsberg for having a provincial mentality. Quite on the contrary: he grew to be a true cosmopolitan, but Ostrava stayed embedded somewhere deep in his consciousness for a long time only to be washed up on the literary shore by Wechsberg's autobiography *The Vienna I Knew*. Even the name itself forms an interesting paradox which is going to interfuse the whole thesis: the book is dedicated to Vienna, yet, it is mostly about Ostrava.

The Vienna I Knew is going to serve as the major source for this thesis, not for its artistic quality, but mainly as a testimony documenting the life of a well-established higher middle class Jewish family in Ostrava, a family that might as well serve as an example or pattern for many similar ones living in that city.

It also opens up the view into the Jewish and non-Jewish life in Ostrava, the unique multiculturalism and dynamics of the city so fondly remembered by Ostrava's sons and daughters all over the world.

This thesis is going to introduce the Wechsberg family, Joseph Wechsberg – the author and mostly Joseph Wechsberg – the Jewish boy from Ostrava. It will try to answer the question of identity of the Wechsbergs and mainly Joseph Wechsberg, describe the constant search for belonging in the changing political and historical events and shortly illustrate the transformation of a devote monarchy subject into a loyal Czechoslovak and later into a world citizen.

The fate of the Wechsbergs goes hand in hand with the fate of Ostrava and also partly the fate of Vienna. Those three aspects are intermingled in *The Vienna I Knew*. It is an account of a world long lost. The Vienna he knew, the Ostrava he grew up in, the Czechoslovakia he learned to accept and the thriving community he learned to miss until the end of his life.

2. The hometown of Wechsberg:

Ostrava and its Jews

2.1. Early history of Jewish settlement

Ostrava doesn't have a rich medieval history of Jewish settlement; the Jews weren't allowed to settle there and so we only find some random notices of Jews passing through town and similar. It was the reforms of Emperor Joseph II., that opened the town gates to Jews. Even slightly before that time, there are already traces of Jewish population, however sporadic they might have been.

2.2. Modernity on the rise: reforms and changes

As early as in the middle of the 18th century, there was a city inn run by a Jewess named Anna. (Hugo Gold goes without mentioning her and attributes the status of the first documented Jew in Ostrava to Markus Schönhof, who will be mentioned later within this chapter.)¹ Running a municipal inn didn't only mean running the taproom, but also holding the city monopoly for alcohol-tapping that dictated the rules to other pubs in town and tributary villages in the surroundings (Přívoz/Oderfurt, Nová Ves, Lhotka).²

Spirits were made in the city distillery, beer was brewed by burghers who held a license and the brewing was regulated by a code of law (later on, they got unified under the city brewery that also became a part of the city monopoly). Wine was imported through the Olomouc archbishopric. The city was strictly following the code of law and the Jewish leaseholders were the ones to enforce this law. This led to numerous conflicts between the Jews and the Christians.³

Up until early 1800's, the city alcohol monopoly was held by the Mannenberg clan. In 1803, the spirits monopoly was taken over by another Jew, Markus Schönhof (also known as Mordechai)⁴ from Brušperk, who was a member of the Jewish community of Lipník.⁵ One of the Markus Schönhof's daughters, Mariana, later married one of the top Ostravan burghers, Josef Zurovec, and converted to Christianity. The Zurovec held prestigious positions in the

¹ GOLD, Hugo. *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Mährens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart : Ein Sammelwerk*. Brünn : Jüdischer Buch- und Kunstverlag, 1929. 623 s.

² ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

³ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

⁴ GOLD, Hugo. *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Mährens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart : Ein Sammelwerk*. Brünn : Jüdischer Buch- und Kunstverlag, 1929. s. 372-374.

⁵ DANĚK, Radoslav. Pivovarník : Na příkladu Josefa Dudaly, Pinkuse Schönhofa, Markuse Strassmanna, Emanuela Neumann ad.. In MYŠKA, Milan; ZÁŘICKÝ, Aleš. *Člověk v Ostravě v XIX. století*. Ostrava : Kazimierz Gajdzica, 2007. s. 67-74.

municipality and when Josef Zurovec died, his widow Mariana could assure a certain social promotion for the Schönhof family.⁶

When the Josephine reforms took effect, the burghers of Moravská Ostrava kept their hostile views towards Jews. This attitude was predetermined by the character of Ostrava of that time itself: it was a small town with main focus on agriculture and crafts. The arrival of any well-organized tradesman was looked upon as an unwanted intrusion and dangerous competition.

The son of Markus Schönhof, Pinkus, inherited the role of his Father and made several efforts to build up his own social and business network. This purpose was fulfilled by the marriage of Magdalena Schönhof (daughter of Markus and sister of Pinkus) to an inn-keeper from Silesian Ostrava, Jáchym Mendel, who helped the family connect to the Jewish communities in Těšín Silesia and also in Slovakia.⁷

Another good match was the connection to the Glesinger (also Gläsinger) clan. Markus (Max) Glesinger came to Mährisch Ostrau in the 1830, joined Pinkus Schönhof in his efforts and received a license for spirit-tapping along with Pinkus. As soon as the burghers of Ostrava learned about this fact, a wave of protests and anti-Jewish petitions hit the town, claiming that Jewish influx into the city was dangerous to the Christians. The locals even accused Glesinger of serving alcohol in his inn during the holy mass and dragging all Christian drunkards over to his pub, while the Christian innkeepers refused to serve alcohol during those hours. The municipality came to the conclusion that Glesinger should be still tolerated in town, but punished for his deeds. Glesinger managed to stay in Ostrava even longer. Also his relative, Elen Glesinger, was allowed to come and live in Ostrava. It was

⁶ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

⁷ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

only in 1837, when the municipality finally declared, that Glesinger should be found, punished and expelled from town.⁸

However, the anti-Jewish excesses did not stop with that and continued on until the burghers of Ostrava finally manage to expel Pinkus Schönhof as well sometime after 1844. While the conditions in Ostrava were rather hostile, the surrounding villages (that were later to become Greater Ostrava) were slightly more favorable to Jews.⁹

⁸ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

⁹ DANĚK, Radoslav. Pivovarník : Na příkladu Josefa Dudaly, Pinkuse Schönhofa, Markuse Strassmanna, Emanuela Neumann ad.. In MYŠKA, Milan; ZÁŘICKÝ, Aleš. *Člověk v Ostravě v XIX. století*. Ostrava : Kazimierz Gajdzica, 2007. s. 67-74.

2.3. Railway writing history

While the Ostravans pursued their anti-Jewish politics and wrote their petty complaints, something much bigger was about to evolve in the region - Salomon Meyer Rothschild, one of the main railway shareholders, bought the Vítkovice Steelworks in 1843. This historical event set the course for a small provincial town of Ostrava and predestined it to grow into a large industrial agglomeration with a multicultural flair and a flourishing Jewish community.

The railway-construction was finished in 1847 enabling the rapid influx and mobility of population, including the Jewish one. As early as in 1841, a Jewish freight-forwarder Babeth Blau from Lipník asked for permission to establish a branch of her business in the railway station building that was to be located in the Přívoz district. The same request came from a competitor of hers, Bernard Fuchs (also from Lipník) in 1846. The city council was not exactly excited about the idea, tried to prolong the bureaucracy as long as they could, but in the end they had to give in and realize, that there is no way to stop the economic growth of Ostrava and the immediate effects of such. Both the companies were granted permission in 1847 and although they both moved their headquarters to Biala later on, they kept their branch in Ostrava running.¹⁰

Slowly, but surely, the Jews of the region started being active in a broader spectrum than just alcohol trading and finances. With the revolutionary year 1848, the possibilities for Jews started looking better, although there were still substantial restrictions to their rights.

As far as the Ostravans are concerned, they didn't seem too engaged in the events and they kept their provincial worldviews and hostility towards Jews.

¹⁰ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

In 1848 – 1849, about 10 Jews asked for permission to stay in Ostrava. The only Jews out of the ten who were granted the permission were the ones, who came from Lipník. The city went as far as to the efforts to prevent Salomon Meyer Rothschild from building the coking plant Karolinka. The dispute had to be judged by the Emperor Franz Joseph I. himself, and the construction was officially permitted in spite of the protest of the Ostravans.¹¹

¹¹ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

2.4. The industrial boom

It was exactly the industrial development of Ostrava and the Rothschild engagement that gave the green light to what was soon to be the local Jewish community that was formed in the second half of the 19th century.

There were two waves of Jewish influx that helped build the Ostravan kehila. In 1850's, Jews from other Moravian cities (Hranice, Lipník) tried their luck in Ostrava – interesting disputes from that time are to be followed, such as the complaint of the burghers that Gerson Katz, the local alcohol monopoly holder, served spoilt beer (1855). The subsequent investigation, however, showed, that the reality was just the other way around: the only beer of good quality was at Katz's pub, while the others were not fit to be served, because they were mostly watered down.¹²

In 1855 there were 14 families registered in the city, with about 50 family members: those were the families of Abraham Berger, Salomon Berger, Josef Noe, Gerson Katz, Jáchym Kafka, Salamon Spitzkopf, Markus Strassmann, Ezechiel Kulka, Leopold Spitzer, Emanuel Neumann, Leopold Mannaberg, Ingác Schmelz and most probably also Moses Hoffmann and Jakub Tauber. Since there was still no community established in Ostrava, all the families were assigned to the Jewish communities of the towns they came from and had to pay their taxes there. The Bergers, Kafkas, Strassmans, Kulkas, Spitzers, Mannabergs and Tauber came from Lipník, Hoffman from Osoblaha and the rest were members of the kehilot in Prostějov, Boskovice and Kroměříž.¹³

¹² ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

¹³ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

The percentage of the Jewish population in Ostrava in 1857 can be estimated according to the census of 1857: it was about 1%. In 1856, a coal dealer Vilém Gutmann came to Ostrava and also two other Jews: Schmul Bruner and Betti Schönhof, a waitress at the inn of Salomon Berger.¹⁴

In the 1860's the Jewish population of Ostrava kept increasing. Those years also meant a significant change in the attitude of the locals and the municipal authorities towards a more favorable view of their Jewish neighbors. The 1916 also meant a new trend in the Jewish migration to Ostrava: the increased influx of Jews from the Těšín region. This was as well a starting point for the following Galician immigration, a phenomenon quite typical for later Ostrava.

The smaller Jewish businesses, mostly inns and pubs, were flourishing in the surrounding villages such as Přívoz/Oderfurt (Přívoz had two inn-keepers at that time: Abraham Berger and Filip Foerster). The Foerster family was also quite active in Nová Ves; their business was then continued by another Jew, Bernard Aufricht.¹⁵

With the increasing number of Jews residing in Ostrava, a new need emerged to take care of their spiritual and ritual needs. The center of Jewish religious life was the inn of Simon Frankl (originally from Uherský Brod)¹⁶ located in the Záměstí quarter, today a part of Slezská Ostrava. In 1832, the first minyan in Ostrava was called together.¹⁷ In 1860 a praying room was established in a rented apartment house also in Záměstí and the Jewish community was unofficially founded with Simon Frankl in the role of the Rosh Ha Kehila. The wish to build a decent house of prayer was always present, but the real action in that

¹⁴ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

¹⁵ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

¹⁶ GOLD, Hugo. *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Mährens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart : Ein Sammelwerk*. Brünn : Jüdischer Buch- und Kunstverlag, 1929. s. 372-374.

¹⁷ GOLD, Hugo. *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Mährens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart : Ein Sammelwerk*. Brünn : Jüdischer Buch- und Kunstverlag, 1929. s. 372-374.

matter was constantly complicated by a dispute, whether the future synagogue should be built on the Silesian grounds or on the Moravian.¹⁸ However, the burial grounds remained in Těšín. In 1863, a Jewish school was founded which was later on relocated to Moravská Ostrava and handed over to the state administration.

1867 marks the final year of the initial stage of Jewish settlement of Ostrava. Ostrava took the final step from a small rural town to a promising ever-growing industrial unit. The end of the first wave left Ostrava with ca 400 Jewish inhabitants, that are some 7% of the city population.¹⁹

The second wave of Jewish migration to Ostrava was just an accompanying factor of a much extensive development: the rapid industrial growth and the consequent population/immigration boom. As mentioned before, Ostrava attracted Galician Jews and also the Jews from Slovakia. In comparison with the former Jewish settlers from Moravia, those were relatively poor and found their livelihood in small trade and some of them even in manual labor in the local industry. Quite a few of them, however, made a rapid progress and landed in the middle- and higher- class business world. Some of the families left a mark in the city history: the Borgers, Bachmanns, Lichtenstern and last, but not least, the Wechsbergs.

Consequently to the greater influx, the Jewish Community in Ostrava anchored its existence also legally. Due to a cholera epidemics in 1872, it was forbidden to transport the deceased over to the Jewish cemetery in Těšín and that lead to the establishment of the Jewish cemetery in Ostrava.

¹⁸ GOLD, Hugo. *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Mährens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart : Ein Sammelwerk*. Brünn : Jüdischer Buch- und Kunstverlag, 1929. s. 372-374.

¹⁹ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

This, however, brought the necessity of the needed burial establishment. March 17th, 1875, the Jewish community of Ostrava turned into an official legal establishment. This was a result of an argument between Frankl, who was apparently a very stubborn man with manners of a self-confident sovereign and the party, which wanted to establish the community on the Moravian grounds rather than on the Silesian. The Moravian initiative was lead by the jeweler Berthold Schwarz and a tradesman Abraham Berger.²⁰ The first assembly was attended by 152 family representatives and Markus Strassman was elected to lead the community. Other members of the committee were: Berthold Schwarz, Gustav Lichtenstein, František Gross, Filip Foerster, Heřman Friedlaender, Leopold Spitzer and MUDr. Josef Wechsberg (a honored physician, also part of the Wechsberg clan). Gradually, the Silesian community including its funds was absorbed to the Moravian one. The rabbi for this community was a Kreisrabbiner Friedmann from Tesin, the teacher position was taken by Adolf Mautner and the cantor position was vacant at that time.²¹ The local Chevra Kadisha had about 100 Members.²² In 1890, a rabbi from St.Pölten, Dr. Bernhard Zimmels, was called to Mährisch Ostrau to serve the needs of the kehila. However, Zimmels did not stay in his positions longer than two years, he died in 1893. The position stayed vacant for about a year until Dr. Jakob Spira ascended the position on August 29th, 1894.²³

At that time, the Jewish population of Ostrava reached ca 5.4% of the total city population. 27% of the smaller and medium-sized businesses were run by Jews. Besides that, many non-Jewish businesses were affiliated in some way with the Rothschild and Gutmann businesses.²⁴

²⁰ GOLD, Hugo. *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Mährens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart : Ein Sammelwerk*. Brünn : Jüdischer Buch- und Kunstverlag, 1929. s. 372-374.

²¹ GOLD, Hugo. *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Mährens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart : Ein Sammelwerk*. Brünn : Jüdischer Buch- und Kunstverlag, 1929. s. 372-374.

²² GOLD, Hugo. *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Mährens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart : Ein Sammelwerk*. Brünn : Jüdischer Buch- und Kunstverlag, 1929.s. 372-374.

²³ GOLD, Hugo. *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Mährens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart : Ein Sammelwerk*. Brünn : Jüdischer Buch- und Kunstverlag, 1929. s. 372-374.

²⁴ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

2.5. Early 1900's and the First Czechoslovak Republic: the flourishing Steel Heart

In 1900 Ostrava's population has reached the number of 30 116, 4500 of them were Jewish. In 1910, the population number grew up to 36 754, 6000 of them were Jewish. However, it wasn't only Ostrava that experienced a growth of Jewish inhabitants. Equally as important were the surrounding communities that later became a part of Greater Ostrava, such as Vítkovice and Přívoz, which also had their own synagogues. The migration boom of Moravská Ostrava settled in the 1920's with the golden standard of 40 – 45 000 people and remains constant up to these days.

The fusion of Moravská Ostrava with the surrounding villages brought the creation of Greater Ostrava as a necessary step. Greater Ostrava was officially merged in 1924. The population number within the soon-to-be new city limits reached up to 113 709 (according to the 1921 census), 9468 Jews. Those numbers can be explained by the WWI influx of Jews from the war-stricken Galicia and Bukovina.²⁵

According to the 1930 census, Greater Ostrava had 125 304 inhabitants, 10 109 Jews among those. Right before 1939, the Jews of Ostrava formed 9% of the population and reached thus the status of the third biggest and most important Jewish community right after Prague and Brno. The Jews were represented in all the social and economical classes from the millionaires to common working men.²⁶

Maybe also thanks to its industrial, open-minded and multicultural character, Ostrava offered a favorable environment for a rich Jewish life of all streams and orientations and

²⁵ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

²⁶ ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000*. Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

became one of the Czechoslovak strongholds of the Zionist movement. A new synagogue was built for the orthodox community that was reinforced by the Galician migration (Žerotínova street, built in 1926). In 1918, Dr. Ruben Färber founded a Jewish publishing house with an adherent book shop that was printing and selling publications on Jewish and Zionist issues. In Mariánské Hory, a technical high school was established under the leadership of Ing. Eisner (1928 – 1939). The community was supporting the building of Eretz Israel through the Kerem Hayesod foundation. In 1921, Ostrava became the official headquarters of the Zionist movement for Moravia and Silesia under the leadership of Dr. Josef Rufeisen. Ostrava had also its own *Sochnut* office and several movements were active there: *Poale Tzion*, *Achdut Avodah*, *Tzionim Klalim*, *Hamizrachi*, *Hechalutz*, *Hashomer Hatzair*, *Tachelet Lavan*, *Maccabi Hatzair*, just to name the most important ones. In 1924, a *Kedma* was founded in Ostrava. In 1919 – 1922, Ostrava had its own pro-Zionistic periodical, *Jüdisches Volksblatt*, while the more assimilated Jews were keen readers and also contributors to the *Ostrauer Zeitung*.²⁷

Ostrava was also well-known for its excellent Jewish social care establishment, especially in the times of the Great Depression, but also later. The local Bikur Cholim built a senior home with the capacity holding up to 25 people in 1931. Also a summer recreation house for children from poor families was established in a nearby mountain village of Ostravice in the Beskydy mountains.²⁸

The Jews in Ostrava were rather German-oriented, although there were groups supporting the Czech movement and they stressed the importance of learning Czech (also in the Jewish school). As loyal as they were to the Empire, after several years of hesitation, they showed the same amount of dedication to the new Czechoslovak state. The community kept thriving and flourishing until the tragic end.

²⁷NIR, Cipora. *Město v nás : Příběhy ostravských Židů*. Ostrava : Montanex, 2004. Dějiny Židů v Ostravě, s. 9-11.

²⁸ADAR, Hannah. *Město v nás : Příběhy ostravských Židů*. Ostrava : Montanex, 2004. Ozdravovna pro židovské děti v Ostravici, s. 30-32.

2.6. The Shoah

In the initial stage of the German invasion, it was planned to annex the industrial Ostrava to the Reich, rather than leave it under the Protectorate. Those plans, however, have never been realized. Ostrava was also the first city occupied by the German troops. The Germans entered the city limits on March, 14th, 1939, one day earlier than Prague. The synagogues were burnt down between June 5th and June 14th, 1939. The first days of WWII were yet another opportunity for the Nazis to show their brutality. They collected several senior citizens of Ostrava and drove them across the Polish borderline, where the first battles already went on and left them there.

In October 1939, there were 4 000 Jews still living in Ostrava.²⁹

When the first anti-Semitic regulations came into effect, the community stood before a difficult management task, especially concerning the (relative) well being of the people who were not able to take care of themselves. Also healthcare was a major issue. When all the Jewish physicians working in hospitals were made redundant, the community established Jewish doctor's offices for each specialization. Thanks to the courage and effort of Salo Kraemer, the head of the community at that time, the German authorities allowed the establishment of a Jewish hospital and dentist's office in Koksárenská 13 in Přívoz with MUDr. Arnošt Ryšavý as the main internist and head physician. Also Hans Wechsberg, one of the Wechsberg clan, was working there. The hospital was open till the very last transport to Theresienstadt in June 1943. The Jewish senior home was confiscated and served as a community center for German women.³⁰

²⁹ WECHSBERG, Evžen Daniel. *Město v nás : Příběhy ostravských Židů*. Ostrava : Montanex, 2004. Židovská nemocnice, s. 19-21

³⁰ WECHSBERG, Evžen Daniel. *Město v nás : Příběhy ostravských Židů*. Ostrava : Montanex, 2004. Židovská nemocnice, s. 19-21.

Ostrava was also the city with the very first transport to a concentration camp Nisko/San. They were supposed to build a camp there and worked under very brutal conditions, although not as brutal as the ones that were to

come later on. After the building plan had been cancelled by the Nazis, some of the Jews were driven over the Russian border and left there and some returned to Ostrava only to be transported again in the times to come. Between September 18th and 30th, 1942, 3442 Jews in four transports left Ostrava for Theresienstadt. (Bh,Bi, Bl, Bm)³¹ Another transport of 72 people (Df) left Ostrava on June 23rd, 1943 and the last transport of people of mixed origin took place in March, 1945.³²

Ostrava was liberated on April, 30th, 1945. Ca 300 Jews came back to Ostrava, not only the ones who lived there before the war, but also some of those who came to Ostrava with the Red Army. The Jewish community was re-established with Isidor Zehngut as the Rosh Ha Kehila. At that time, Ostrava was also an important migration joint for the Jews, who were returning from concentration camps in the east.³³ The summer house in Ostravice was reopened and served as a recreation and convalescence center for children, who survived. Right after the war, many of the young Ostravans, who returned, made aliyah.

Only 184³⁴ Ostravans survived the Shoah. From the very few lucky ones who survived the horrors of the Nazi rule, only a very small number of them returned to their hometown. The rest of the former Ostravans lives scattered all around the world: mostly in England, in the USA and in Israel (as it is the case of Wechsberg family).

³¹WECHSBERG, Evžen Daniel. *Město v nás : Příběhy ostravských Židů*. Ostrava : Montanex, 2004. Židovská nemocnice, s. 19-21.

³²WECHSBERG, Evžen Daniel. *Město v nás : Příběhy ostravských Židů*. Ostrava : Montanex, 2004. Židovská nemocnice, s. 19-21.

³³WECHSBERG, Evžen Daniel. *Město v nás : Příběhy ostravských Židů*. Ostrava : Montanex, 2004. Židovská nemocnice, s. 19-21.

³⁴WECHSBERG, Evžen Daniel. *Město v nás : Osvobození Ostravy*. Ostrava : Montanex, 2004. Židovská nemocnice, s. 22.

2.7. The Jews of Ostrava today

After 1948, the Jewish community kept existing with certain alternations and fusions with the community of Olomouc up to this day, when it is a single community again serving the needs of the local Jews as the regional center.

There are several notable personalities who came originally from Ostrava. Among those who are still remembered: Ilse Weber, a poet and an author of juvenile literature, Shlomo Rozen, a former minister of absorption and member of the Knesset, Joseph Wechsberg and Meir M. Färber, an author.

Recently, a new wave of interest for their long-lost hometown is spreading among the English Ostravans. They formed an interest group around the Kingston Sefer Torah, that came originally from Ostrava. They are issuing their own newsletter, trying to track down their family histories, organizing events and connecting with their original home with great enthusiasm.³⁵ It is their initiative that will bring *Stolpersteine* to the streets of Ostrava within the next few months.

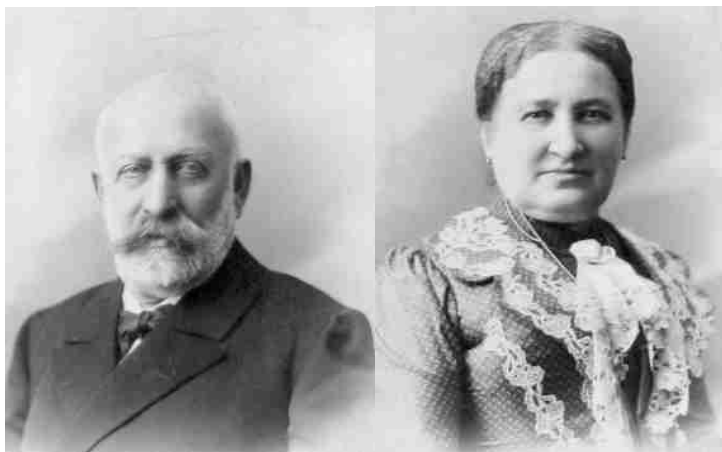
³⁵ <http://www.kingston-synagogue.org.uk/group.php?c=50>

3. Tight bonds worlds apart

The Wechsberg family: a short overview

To understand and describe the life of Joseph Wechsberg, it is useful to penetrate deeper in the history and fate of the whole Wechsberg family; not simply to see the milieu Wechsberg grew up in, but also because of the importance of the family within the social and Jewish life of Ostrava. Last, but not least, the story of the Wechsbergs is a typical one similar to the fate of other higher-middle-class Jewish families in Moravian cities of that time.

Just like many other families who found their residence and prosperity in Ostrava, the Wechsbergs came from Galicia, which was a part of the Habsburg monarchy at that time. The head of the family, Albert Wechsberg, was born on September, 6th 1831 in Šenov near Mährisch Ostrau. As far as his early years and education are concerned, there is a lack of information. He married his cousin, Fanny Wechsberg, the daughter of Pinkus Wechsberg from Staré Hamry and had several children with her: Wilhelmina (1861), Rudolfina (1863), Hugo (1864), Rudolf (1868), Max (1870), Gabriela (1871), Eugen (1873), Alfred (1875) and the youngest Siegfried (1878), the father of Joseph Wechsberg.



Albert Wechsberg

Fanny Wechsberg

The family patriarch started a business in Orlová: an inn and a corn trade. Since the business was successful and with the full emancipation, the Wechsbergs moved to Mährisch Ostrau, where he bought a steam mill, in 1879 to seek their happiness and prosperity in a bigger city connected to a railway that provided better trade options.

Soon, the corn trade was not enough for Wechsberg and he started one of the first financial offices in Ostrava that was later to become Wechselstube und Dampfmühle A. Wechsberg und Co. and in the end, Bankovní a velkoobchodní dům A. Wechsberg.



However, the journey to the real banking house was far from quick and easy. When Wechsberg started his money-changing business, he did not even have a physical office – all of the transactions were made out in the open, on the main square and initially with the merchants only, who came to the periodical markets to Ostrava.

Later on, as Wechsberg established a physical office, local entrepreneurs came to take loans from him and Grandfather Wechsberg could, at least according to his Grandson's memories, sense and estimate the credibility of his clients by intuition. This ability was then

inherited by one of the sons of Albert Wechsberg. As Joseph Wechsberg mentions in *The Vienna I Knew*³⁶ and Šústková³⁷ after him, the Ostravans used to call the Wechsberg family patriarch either "our Rothschild" or "that old usurer" depending on whether they received a loan, or not. Either way, the Wechsberg bank of the turn of the century was a prosperous business of regional importance.



Jüd.Volksblatt, 1920

All the the sons of Albert Wechsberg received a decent education, but only the three oldest ones had a free choice of future career: Hugo received a university degree in chemistry and settled down in Hamburg, where he continued his career as a scientist. Rudolf went to a technical college and became an engineer.

³⁶ ŠÚSTKOVÁ, Hana. Osudy rodiny Wechsbergů. In Muzeum Kroměřížska. *Židé a Morava : Sborník z konference konané v Muzeu Kroměřížska dne 15. listopadu 2006*. Kroměříž : Muzeum Korměřížska, 2007. s. 87-96. ISBN 9788085945508.

³⁷ ŠÚSTKOVÁ, Hana. Osudy rodiny Wechsbergů. In Muzeum Kroměřížska. *Židé a Morava : Sborník z konference konané v Muzeu Kroměřížska dne 15. listopadu 2006*. Kroměříž : Muzeum Korměřížska, 2007. s. 87-96. ISBN 9788085945508.



Hugo Wechsberg

Max, the uncle that Joseph Wechsberg gives a lot of space to in his autobiography, studied medicine in Vienna, became a renowned gynecologist and decided to stay in the Habsburg capitol. The reason, why he is mentioned with so much attention in *The Vienna I Knew*³⁸ is his black sheep status, an intriguing aura of an adventurous family outsider.

Dr. Max Wechsberg had a passion for women and what is even worse, for gambling which made him go broke several times in his life. Grandfather Wechsberg helped him financially, but even the family pressure that followed was not enough to make Max stop gambling. The roller-coaster of gambling and a bipolar disease brought Max to a suicide which he committed in the house of Siegfried Wechsberg, the Father of Joseph.



Dr. Max Wechsberg

³⁸ ŠÚSTKOVÁ, Hana. Osudy rodiny Wechsbergů. In Muzeum Kroměřížska. *Židé a Morava : Sborník z konference konané v Muzeu Kroměřížska dne 15. listopadu 2006*. Kroměříž : Muzeum Kroměřížska, 2007. s. 87-96. ISBN 9788085945508.

The youngest three of Albert Wechsberg were not granted the possibility to decide about their further professional life – they were to fill the shoes of their Father, continuing the family business. They were, indeed, prepared well – their Father made sure to secure good business education for his sons and they received the practical experience in Vienna. Further education was the school of life, as Grandfather Wechsberg employed them in his bank after their education was completed.

According to their father's wish, Eugen, Siegfried and Alfred stayed in the same house right above the bank and their offices. The oldest son Eugen married Irma Krieger in 1903 and had two children: Kurt (who later became a lawyer) and Hans (who later became a physician). After the family patriarch Albert had died, Eugen took up the senior position, but it was all three of the brothers who had a say. When World War One started, Eugen was mobilized and spent the whole war stationed in Těšín. In the memories of Joseph Wechsberg, Eugen portrays a well-dressed Austro-Hungarian officer figure.

It was Eugen's younger brother Alfred, who took care of the bank while Eugen was serving in the army.



Eugen Wechsberg Irma Wechsberg, neé Krieger



Kurt Wechsberg



MUDr. Hans Wechsberg



Eugen Wechsberg in Merano

Alfred Wechsberg married Anna, neé Goldfinger in 1901, who came from a family that didn't enjoy too much social prestige and this stigma followed the couple through their life together. They had two children together, Edith and Raul (the fate of those two will be described closely in the next chapters).



Alfred Wechsberg

Anna Wechsberg, nee Goldfinger

It was Alfred, who later defrauded all that was left of the Wechsbergian finances and established himself in Vienna.

The youngest son was Siegfried, who married yet another of the Krieger daughters, Hermina (Minka) also to a great disappointment of his father. It might have been father Siegfried Joseph Wechsberg had his adventurous spirit after. Aged 16, Siegfried ran away from home in order to join the navy in Trieste. After his father made sure to bring his son back home, Siegfried gave up on his romantic dreams and picked up the family business. Siegfried and Minka lived in a harmonic marriage and gave life to two sons: Joseph and his

younger brother Max. Siegfried Wechsberg was killed in action on the Galician front right at the beginning of World War I.³⁹



Siegfried Wechsberg



Hermina Wechsberg, neé Krieger

³⁹ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters: Joseph Wechsberg, [The Vienna I Knew; transl. Carter Kniffler].* Hugendubel, 1982. 294p.



Hermina Wechsberg

It wasn't only the career of his sons that Grandfather Wechsberg tried so hard to influence, it was also the private life that the family patriarch believed to have a say in. However, the attempts of Albert Wechsberg were all in vain and the sons chose their life partner according to their own taste and criteria. As Joseph Wechsberg mentions in *The Vienna I Knew*, Hermina (Minka) Wechsberg (néé. Krieger), the mother of Joseph, was the only daughter-in-law the patriarch tolerated or maybe even liked, although she came from a family that was a competition to Alfred Wechsberg in his early business years.

After Albert's wife Františka (Fanny) died (8.11.1904), Grandfather Wechsberg could manage the household on his own and he invited a young relative, Martha Gold, from Trieste to Ostrava to come and serve him. She was only 16 years old at that time, but since Albert Wechsberg could not tolerate strangers in his house, she had to manage the task on her own.



The Wechsberg house





Albert Wechsberg - Obituary

Albert Wechsberg died on October, 26th, 1913. The obituaries in the local press summarized his life in the following way:

”Mit dem Verstorbenen ist einer der Bekanntesten und ältesten Einwohner unserer Stadt dahingeschieden. Herr Wechsberg, der das Patriarchenalter von 82 Jahren überschritt, suchte in seinem langen, arbeitsreichen Leben nicht durch äußere glänzende Taten sich auszuzeichnen; er gehörte viel mehr zu den immer seltener werdenden Menschen, die ihr ganzes, tiefes Können in großer Bescheidenheit in den Dienst ihrer Familie stellen. Und so zeigt sich uns das Wirken dieses ganzen Mannes, der, wie allgemein bekannt, unbekümmert um Gunst oder Mißgunst immer seines geraden Weges ging, darin, daß es ihm gelang, sich und seiner Familie geachtete Stellungen in unserer Stadt zu erwerben.

Herr Albert Wechsberg, der ein Bruder des vor einigen Jahren verstorbenen und in Ostrau verdienten, hatte auch durch mehrere Jahren seine grosse Erfahrung und sein frohes Schaffen in den Dienst der Kultusgemeinde gestellt, der er als Kultusausschußmitglied angehörte. Durch die Aufrichtigkeit seines Wesens und die Biederkeit

seines Schaffens war der Verstorbene, der morgen zu Grabe getragen wird, in der ganzen Stadt beliebt und geachtet.“⁴⁰

When Alfred Wechsberg took over the decisive role in the bank, he invested all of the family finances into war loans, as many of his pro-Habsburg contemporaries did. When it came out clear that the Empire is coming to an end, Alfred still managed to sell the war loans, but it was only with substantial loss. In 1918, the Wechsberg banking house was in the negatives and Alfred started negotiations with Creditanstalt, a leading Austrian financial institution that was willing to buy the bank and make it a Creditanstalt subsidiary in Moravská Ostrava.

Alfred took off to Vienna with the rest of the Wechsbergian money and bought a share in the Lombard- und Eskomptbank, securing himself a comfortable living on the costs of his family back in Ostrava. That good life, however, did not take long and it was over with the Black Friday and its consequences. Lombard- und Eskomptbank was consumed by the Rothschildian Creditanstalt and that left Alfred Wechsberg penniless. In 1927, Alfred's wife Anna died after a long illness and Alfred married Ella Fischer, neé. Ritschel. Alfred moved back to Ostrava and lived in one of the first social housing facilities till the rest of his days visited only by his brother Eugen. He died on November 11, 1938. Also both of his children took a tragic end – they committed suicide.⁴¹

Most of the Wechsbergs did not survive the Shoah, Joseph Wechsberg's mother was among the victims, while his brother Max survived and so did a few other relatives. The Wechsberg family or whatever's left of it still lives scattered around the world, in Europe, in the USA and in Israel.

⁴⁰ Ostrauer Zeitung, Mährisch Ostrau, 27.10. 1913

⁴¹ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. 294p.

4. Joseph Wechsberg: A Short Biography

4.1. Early years

Joseph Wechsberg was born on August 29th 1907 in the city of Mährisch Ostrau (today's Ostrava) in Moravia to Father Siegfried Wechsberg, a son of a wealthy and influential banker family, and Hermina (Minka) from the clan of Kriegers, successful corn traders. He spent his early childhood years in the circle of his extended family and in wealth. This, however, took a rapid end with the outbreak of World War I, where his Father, a loyal Austro-Hungarian officer, died in action on the Galician front. Since the family invested a substantial part of their assets into war loans, the outcome of World War I was more than tragic for the financial situation of the Wechsbergs. The final fall of the banker clan was brought about by Alfred Wechsberg, an uncle of Joseph, who defrauded whatever was left of the Wechsberg money and established his own well-off life in Vienna.⁴²

⁴² ŠÚSTKOVÁ, Hana. Osudy rodiny Wechsbergů. In Muzeum Kroměřížska, *Židé a Morava : Sborník z konference konané v Muzeu Kroměřížska dne 15. listopadu 2006*. Kroměříž : Muzeum Kroměřížska, 2007. s. 87-96. ISBN 9788085945508.

Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters: Joseph Wechsberg, [The Vienna I Knew; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. 294p.

SINGER, Kristina. *Joseph Wechsberg* [online]. 2007 [cit. 2010-08-10]. Joseph Wechsberg. Dostupné z WWW: <<http://www.josephwechsberg.com>>.



L:R: Hermina, Siegfried and Joseph Wechsberg



Joseph Wechsberg, aged 2

Joseph, his Mother and his younger brother were not left with much to live on and were even forced to rent out several rooms in their apartment. This, however, didn't prevent the mother from making sure the boys receive a proper education: first at a Jewish school and then at a German grammar school.

Young Joseph, influenced by the family tradition of amateur musicians, was also a keen violinist. He picked up the violin at the age of eight and this instrument accompanied him throughout his life and opened many doors to new experiences that gave life to interesting short stories and books on music so typical for Wechsberg's writing.

4.2. The studies and coming of age

At the age of seventeen, he entered the Vienna State Academy of Music and everything seemed like he was going to assume a position of concert violinist. This, however, never happened and young Joseph pursued his further career in more practical disciplines.⁴³

After completing his secondary education, Wechsberg ascended his law studies at the Prague University Law School, more to the joy of the family than his own, but music was pulling Wechsberg like a strong magnet towards Vienna. An ingenious young man as Joseph Wechsberg was, he made friends with an official at Law School and thus managed to avoid most of the lectures and come only for examination to Prague. This allowed him to spend as much time in Vienna as he wanted and to take up another course of studies there, at the Hochschule für Welthandel in Vienna. Those studies were also a simple camouflage of the real purpose of Wechsberg's stay and his true passion: the education at the Vienna State Academy of Music and the nights spent as a claquer.

The final stage of his studies was the Sorbonne. However, Wechsberg did not see much of this educational institution, either, since he accepted a position of a violinist in a ship band on a number of French transatlantic ocean liners.⁴⁴

This experience was a source of inspiration for Wechsberg's collection of short stories that was published under the name *Looking for a Bluebird*.

⁴³ SINGER, Kristina. *Joseph Wechsberg* [online]. 2007 [cit. 2010-08-10]. Joseph Wechsberg. Dostupné z WWW: <<http://www.josephwechsberg.com>>.

⁴⁴ SINGER, Kristina. *Joseph Wechsberg* [online]. 2007 [cit. 2010-08-10]. Joseph Wechsberg. Dostupné z WWW: <<http://www.josephwechsberg.com>>.



Joseph Wechsberg on board

4.3. Professional life and personal life

After receiving his degree in law, Wechsberg returned to Ostrava to practice law in a local company. Further on, he assumed an apprentice position in a Prague-based legal company. However, this employment was far from Wechsberg's wishes. At the same time, he became an enthusiastic reporter for various German-language newspapers within Czechoslovakia, the most famous of them being *Prager Tagblatt*, a periodical not openly Jewish, but very popular with Jewish audience (1930-37).

In 1934, Wechsberg married Anna Novák. Having attended officers' candidate school for the Czechoslovak army in 1929-30, he became a lieutenant and found himself commanding a machine gun company on the Polish frontier in 1938.⁴⁵ In the same year, he was sent to the United States by the Czechoslovak government as Secretary of the Parliamentary Commission to explain and discuss the Sudeten crisis. They left Czechoslovakia for the United States and what was supposed to be merely a short-term stay turned out to be a life-saving option and a refuge when World War II broke out. Knowing about the situation in Czechoslovakia, the Wechsbergs were granted asylum in the USA.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ SINGER, Kristina. *Joseph Wechsberg* [online]. 2007 [cit. 2010-08-10]. Joseph Wechsberg. Dostupné z WWW: <<http://www.josephwechsberg.com>>.

⁴⁶ SINGER, Kristina. *Joseph Wechsberg* [online]. 2007 [cit. 2010-08-10]. Joseph Wechsberg. Dostupné z WWW: <<http://www.josephwechsberg.com>>.



Joseph Wechberg and Anna Novák - wedding



Joseph and Anna Wechsberg

Hermina Wechsberg, the mother of Joseph, stayed in Ostrava and perished in Auschwitz when the "final solution" took effect. Joseph's younger brother Max escaped to England and later on joined his brother in America.

After settling in America, Wechsberg started an enthusiastic self-study of English. He mastered it in writing and was soon able to produce a convincing straight-to-the-point prose, while he never really overcame his heavy foreign accent. The obituary of Joseph Wechsberg in *The New Yorker*, the "home" of his brilliant reports with a continental flair describes the author's beginnings in the following way:

"In 1939, Joe Weschsberg picked up his first copy of *The New Yorker*, found what he took to be its atmosphere congenial, and resolved that he would someday write for it, even though at the time he knew no more than a couple of hundred words in English. Living in Hollywood, in a colony of Central European émigrés, he taught himself English, and within four years they were publishing his reminiscences of days in the more raffish of his occupations. He spoke with a heavy accent, which he never overcame, but he wrote an unaccented and convincing prose; his touch was light and faintly Continental. In 1943, he was drafted into the Army, and it was shortly thereafter that he arrived in *The New Yorker* offices, a lugubrious and bewildered young man in uniform who was about to be shipped to Europe as a technical sergeant in the psychological warfare division. Before he left the premises, they talked over the possibility that if ever the war took him back to Ostrava he might write about his return. "⁴⁷

⁴⁷Obituary. *The New Yorker*. 25. 4. 1983.



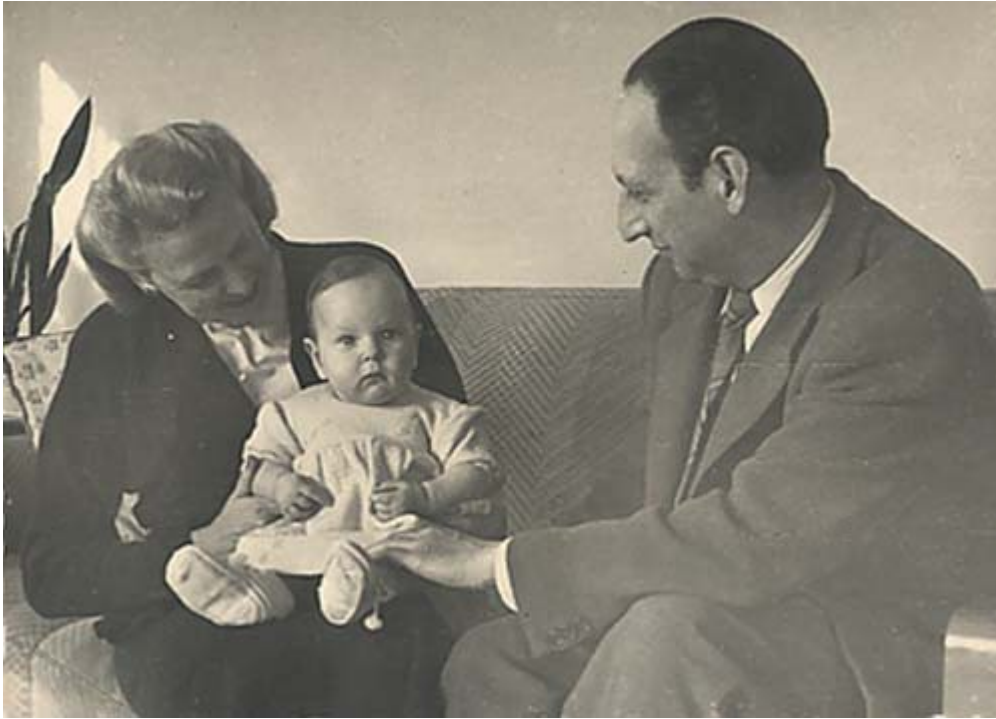
1945, Wechsberg in Czechoslovakia

And indeed, Wechsberg made it all the way back and wrote

”a moving account of that experience for the magazine. It turned out to be the first of more than a hundred reporting pieces that Joe Wechsberg wrote for *The New Yorker* over three decades.“⁴⁸

Joseph Wechsberg was granted the US citizenship in 1944. In 1950, while in Meran, his only daughter Popp ywas born.

⁴⁸ Obituary. *The New Yorker*. 25. 4. 1983.



Wechsberg grew into a brilliant reporter in the United States writing for *The New Yorker*, *Gourmet*, *Esquire*, *Holiday*, *Playboy*, *The Atlantic*, *Saturday Review*, *Saturday Evening Post* and *Paris Journal*. Throughout his journalist career, Wechsberg was inspired by his love of music. He wrote profiles of Rudolf Bing, George London, Artur Rubinstein, Isaac Stern, George Szell, and the Budapest String Quartet. In the field of gastronomy, also very close to the author's heart, he elaborated profiles of Ferdinand Point and Alexandre Dumaine and the celebrated French restaurateurs Mme. Marie-Louise Point and Henri Soulé. Influenced by his family history, he wrote a series on the merchant bankers. Last, but not least, Wechsberg's passion for traveling gave life to many travel reports from places like Berlin, Karlsbad, Bonn, Vienna, Trieste, Budapest, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, Warsaw, Athens and Baghdad.

Over the course of his career, Wechsberg wrote over two dozens of books of non-fiction, that was translated into many languages (mostly into German, though). The New Yorker obituary of Wechsberg states his outstanding personal and professional qualities and his journalistic brilliance:

”He could scarcely have avoided becoming a reporter: he had an intense curiosity about how things worked and how people behaved; he was a natural absorber of sounds and sights and facts; he took nothing for granted; detail enchanted him... And, just as his deepest enthusiasms turned into his subjects, his personal qualities pervaded his writing. Behind a melancholy exterior, he was a person of spirit and humor; his heart was warm, and the warmth went out beyond his wife and daughter and close friends to the people and places he wrote about. The tragic sense and the sense of fun met in Joe Wechsberg, and so did worldliness and innocence.”⁴⁹



What Wechsberg captures in his works is the world before World War II and to a certain extent even the one before WWI, the happy and nostalgia-inducing times that are never to be repeated. Each of Wechsberg’s written pieces expresses the longing for the idealized past and the emptiness, a mere shadow of the years gone by that cannot be replaced by anything the modern world has to offer. Often, a strongly articulated criticism of communistic regimes (especially the one in his hometown) rezones through his works.

Wechsberg spent the last years of his life in his beloved Vienna, but he often traveled back to the United States in search of familiar faces.

He died at the age of 75 in Vienna Austria, on 10 April 1983. Šústková mentions, that Wechsberg (suffering from depression, a “family disease“, as his mother once named it)

⁴⁹ Obituary. *The New Yorker*. 25. 4. 1983.

committed suicide. However, none of the other materials the author of the thesis has read, state this openly; only his German obituary does give the reader a taste of what might have caused the death of Joseph Wechsberg.

”Er hatte sich aus der Öffentlichkeit, der er im Grunde immer nur als Schreiber bekannt war, zurückgezogen und viele seiner laufenden Geschäfte liquidiert. Er hatte längst gesagt, daß er Freude an dem meisten, was ihm das Leben bedeutete, verloren habe...Manchmal ging er in den letzten Jahren trotzdem noch in die Oper, manchmal spielte er noch Hausmusik und manchmal versuchte er sich noch melancholisch als Beschwörer der Vergangenheit. Wie Torberg war er einer, für den sein Lebensumkreis nicht mit der Monarchie, sondern erst um 1938 endgültig zerstört wurde. Nachher schien ihm alles nur noch Abgesang und Nachhall, und auch das nur in allerbesten Momenten.“⁵⁰

What was left from the life of Joseph Wechsberg are his masterpieces of journalism, his books of non-fiction and a touch of nostalgia for a world better than ours.

As far as scholarly works on Wechsberg are concerned, he is mentioned in the biographical works such as *Biographia Judaica Bohemiae*⁵¹ and in works and essays dealing with Czechoslovak Jewry such as *The Jews of Czechoslovakia*.⁵² A deeper study was made in 2007 in the Master thesis of Kristina Singer, a part of which is available online on the website dedicated to Joseph Wechsberg and constantly further elaborated.⁵³

⁵⁰ Joseph Wechsberg tot. *Die Presse*. 4.4. 1983, 22, s. 1-10.

⁵¹ WLASCHEK, Rudolf. *Biographia Judaica Bohemiae*. Dortmund : Forschungsstelle Ostmitteleuropa, 1995. 175 s. ISBN 978-3923293575.

⁵² *The Jews of Czechoslovakia*. Philadelphia-New York : Jewish Pub. Society, 1968. 700 s.

⁵³ SINGER, Kristina. *Joseph Wechsberg* [online]. 2007 [cit. 2010-08-10]. Joseph Wechsberg. Dostupné z WWW: <<http://www.josephwechsberg.com>>.

5. The Vienna he loved and the Ostrava he knew

5.1. Introduction

Out of the many titles written by Joseph Wechsberg throughout his productive life, there is only one that provides the reader with such a broad scope of substantial information about the author's background: in this case, it is *The Vienna I Knew*⁵⁴ written at the very end of the author's life. The first interesting feature of this book is its title itself and the title that was given to the German translation that was published three years after the English original.⁵⁵ While the English original uses the old glamour of Vienna to attract the potential buyer, the German name stays in more familiar circles and sticks with the *Cufflinks of my Father*. What seems to be a cheap marketing trick can also carry a deeper, symbolic meaning, because it is not only the old Vienna that Wechsberg describes with such passion, it is also the black, provincial Ostrava (or Mährisch-Ostrau as it was referred to in the year of Wechsberg's childhood and early adulthood) that raised the future author and journalist.

The two different titles of the very same book put the two cities into opposition and give the author of this thesis a chance to explore the character of both, their contrast and their meaning in Joseph Wechsberg's life. In this case, Vienna will serve more like a contrasting point to help describe Ostrava as it was in the beginning of the 20th century.

Indeed, it seems like there could not be two cities, two worlds on its own so different that Vienna and Ostrava in the depiction of Wechsberg. While Vienna is a synonym for the fascinating world of wealth, culture and tradition, Ostrava is merely a poor relative that is trying to mimic the glamour of Vienna with greater or smaller success. It was not

⁵⁴ *The Vienna I Knew (Memories of a European Childhood)*: Joseph Wechsberg, 1979; Doubleday & Co., hardcover.

⁵⁵ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. 294p.

by accident that Wechsberg's mother Minka (Hermina) perceived the week in Vienna as the highlight of her year. And yet, it is also that opposition that gives the reader a unique chance to take a deeper look at the social life of Ostrava and follow the story of the whole Wechsberg family – a fate so typical for other higher middle class Jewish families of that time. The following chapters will explore the social and political background of the Wechsberg family as it was described in *The Vienna I Knew*.

It would be a mistake to perceive *The Vienna I Knew* only as an autobiography based solely on Wechsberg's own experience. The contents are reaching far beyond that, well into the memoir book encompassing not only the author's individual memories, but also a collective experience of the Wechsberg family in and outside of Ostrava as the young Joseph heard it from his relatives. Sometimes the family history does not get out of this process undistorted, as will be illustrated later.

5.2. *The Vienna I Knew*: a memoir book or an autobiography?

The Vienna I Knew appeared in late 1970's (1979), in the time where autobiography was one of the common literary genres already. The question is whether this work of Wechsberg's can really be considered an autobiography in the traditional sense or if it merges with the memoir book and if so, what are the typical features that give the guidelines and support to label *The Vienna I Knew* either way.

"Autobiography, in distinction from biography and the memoir, functions primarily as an introspective, self-reflective mode of literary discourse. Perceptions and emotional responses of the self-assume, in autobiography, the roles assigned to deeds and events in the life of the other in the biography and the memoir. For these latter genres, the significance of this other is independent of personal consideration, arising rather from social consensus. Autobiography operates under an entirely different set of criteria. For the autobiographer, the significance of the other is determined solely by the role that he or she plays in the formation of the self, regardless of social standing."⁵⁶

Applying Moseley's definition to Wechsberg's case, *The Vienna I Knew* falls more into the category of autobiography, since Wechsberg focuses the majority of his attention to his very own development and the perspective is rather subjective. This is also demonstrated by the formal style, such as using the first person narrative.

At the same time, *The Vienna I Knew* provides another reason to support the extent to which Wechsberg was rooted deep in the German culture, rather than any other one, however he might have stressed also his Jewish

⁵⁶ MOSELEY, Marcus. Jewish Autobiography : The Elusive Subject. *Jewish Quarterly Review* [online]. 2005, vol. 95, no. 1 [cit. 2010-01-02], s. 16-59. Dostupný z WWW: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jewish_quarterly_review/v095/95.1moseley.pdf>.

heritage. In fact, the best argument for Wechsberg's inclination to the identity shared with his Jewish contemporaries in Czechoslovakia would be exactly the acceptance of German culture and identity, or at least sub-identity. As Hillel Kieval pointed out, the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia had to undergo two identity changes: one from the pure Jewish one to the German one and the next one from the German identity to the Czechoslovak one.⁵⁷ In the case of Wechsberg, however, the Czechoslovak identity did not even have a chance to fully develop and settle in when Wechsberg left the country to adopt yet another picture of himself – the one of a cosmopolitan and a citizen of a long lost world that he preserved in his writing.

And yet, it is exactly that long lost world that formed the author Joseph Wechsberg in his early years and that finds reflexion further on in his works, be it in the choice of topics or the style. As Moseley claims, this is nothing unusual and the autobiographical works are a great document of the importance of the early childhood.

Taking Moseley's general observation about the role of childhood in an autobiography as a starting point, the following working hypothesis is to be formulated that the childhood experience was decisive for the later life of Joseph Wechsberg and his works.

“Autobiography is contingent upon a degree of historical awareness. The autobiographer does not portray a predetermined self or being, but rather tracks an open-ended process of becoming....Many of the more decisive encounters with the other in the shaping of the autobiographer's self occur in the years of childhood and adolescence. Parents, teachers, schoolmates, and domestic staff may thus achieve a prominence in the autobiography that would, in the memoir, be reserved for generals and prime ministers, renowned men of letters, and so on. “⁵⁸

⁵⁷ KIEVAL, Hillel J. *The Making of Czech Jewry : National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870-1918 (Studies in Jewish History)*. [s.l.] : Oxford University Press, 1988. 296 s. ISBN 0195040570.

⁵⁸ MOSELEY, Marcus. Jewish Autobiography : The Elusive Subject. *Jewish Quarterly Review* [online]. 2005, vol. 95, no. 1 [cit. 2010-01-02], s. 16-59. Dostupný z WWW: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jewish_quarterly_review/v095/95.1moseley.pdf>.

Indeed, the relatives and the house staff comes alive in *The Vienna I Knew* and even the petty figures that an adult would not pay attention to gain great importance in the process of the formation of Joseph Wechsberg's personality. On the other hand, the political and social changes do not come unnoticed and unmentioned, but they are not there as the main focus, they rather form a narrative frame in which the figures of the Wechsberg family life are set.

Also the stages of Joseph Wechsberg's childhood are portrayed disproportionately. Most room and focus is dedicated to the years of Wechsberg's pre-teens and early teens, while the early adulthood is cut down to the necessary information satisfying the reader who wants to know what has become of the author. The conclusion of the book is formed by a short excursion into the current life of the author at the time when the autobiography was being written.

Wechsberg often steps into the narration from the point of view of the older, more experienced self, laughing and wondering about his adventures as a child and teenagers and explains the importance those events left in his life and how they influenced his personality. He fast-forwards the reader to the contemporary world and puts the picture of his childhood in opposition with the post-WWII reality and the late 1970's when the book was written. The environment of Ostrava of Wechsberg's youth is slightly idealized, but Wechsberg contextualized it well and never forgot to set it into the frame of historical and political events that were far from idyllic. However harsh the times might have been, Wechsberg comments on the difficulties from the viewpoint of an elderly author and adds the naive perspective of a child he once was, creating a clear contrast between the two viewpoints.

”Die einhellige Meinung war, daß das Bild des neuen Präsidenten eine Verbesserung war gegenüber dem Glanzdruck des letzten Kaisers mit der Habsburger Lippe und den erschreckten Augen. (Er hatte allen Grund, erschreckt zu sein.) Und das war, so

weit es uns Schüler der Klasse 2B betraf, der Kommentar zu dem Anfang der neuen Ära.

Seitdem habe ich eine eigene, distanzierte Meinung über historische Ereignisse...Der Niedergang der Habsburger Monarchie verursachte in der Klasse 2B weniger Aufregung als ein Fußballspiel gegen die Mannschaft der Klasse 2A.“⁵⁹

The early stages of Joseph Wechsberg's life and the late one are bridged with the motif of the cufflinks of Siegfried Wechsberg, the Father. This shows another typical feature of an autobiography: a focus on the personal history and the recording of the past with the consciousness of the further life story of the subject: the author himself.

”Nein, ich möchte sie [the cufflinks] nicht verlieren...Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters habe ich noch.“⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.223.

⁶⁰ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.294.

5.3. The identity search

When Joseph Wechsberg was born, Ostrava was already a thriving industrial city with a rapidly growing Jewish population that was to peak in the time of the first Czechoslovak Republic. The Jewish community there, however, belonged to the youngest ones in Moravia. It was the growing industry and business possibilities that brought the first Jewish settlers to Ostrava. Although the very first ones came from nearby small town with well-established Jewish communities, the bulk of what was to become the Jewish population of Ostrava came searching for a better living from the neighboring Poland, mostly from Galicia. This was also the case of the ancestors of Joseph Wechsberg.⁶¹

The author's Grandfather was born in 1827, in the time when the Austro-Hungarian politics was still not that favorable towards Jews. But that was subject to change in the years to come. After the emancipation of Jews in the monarchy⁶², the cities experienced an influx of Jewish settlers who were to build the middle-class Jewish urban population so typical for the central – and west-European region⁶³. As a well-to-do tradesman and later on a banker in Ostrava, Albert Wechsberg can be considered a typical representative of this new upper class Jewish bourgeoisie and his story resembles many others of that time and location (e.g. the family story of J.W.'s mother's family – the Kriegers). He started a small business and soon became successful. He was one of the financiers of Ostrava and the founder of the Wechsberg bank, a family business often remembered in *The Vienna I Knew*. The story of

⁶¹ ŠÚSTKOVÁ, Hana. Osudy rodiny Wechsbergů. In Muzeum Kroměřížska. *Židé a Morava : Sborník z konference konané v Muzeu Kroměřížska dne 15. listopadu 2006*. Kroměříž : Muzeum Kroměřížska, 2007. s. 87-96. ISBN 9788085945508.

⁶² The revolutionary year 1848 brought many promises also for the Jewish population. The Empire granted civil rights and religious freedom to different groups within the Monarchy, including the Jews. The constitution issued by Franz Joseph I. in 1849 contained a clause guaranteeing equal rights, but this document was abolished two years later. In the early 1850's, new laws restricting Jewish life were issued. The result of 1848 in the Empire was quite ambiguous: Several laws that were not favorable to Jews were abolished, among them: the Jewish tax and the restrictive marriage law. This, however did not mean a full freedom for the Jews and unrestricted marriages; there still was a licence to be obtained. Also certain professions and the ownership of land were still prohibited to Jews. It was the Ausgleich in 1867 that granted the Jews full citizen rights within the Empire.

For more reference, see: DUBNOW, Simon. *History of the Jews : From the Congress of Vienna to the Emergence of Hitler*. New York : A.S. Barnes and Co, 1973. 915 s.

⁶³ For further reference, see: ROZENBLIT, Marsha. *He Jews of Vienna, 1867-1914 : assimilation and identity*. Albany : State University of New York Press, 1983. 284 s.

Alfred Wechsberg comes back to Joseph's writing in the form of an inspiration of the title *Merchant Bankers* – a book describing the rise of the great banker families.

By the time Joseph was born (1907), the Wechsberg family was already well established within the higher middle class of Ostrava. As representants of such, they did not really identify themselves with the Czech population of the city, but they were loyal Austro-Hungarian citizens using German as their mother tongue. Also their cultural inclination was rather German-oriented and so were their social contacts. Although they did not live in isolation from their Czech neighbors and they did meet them on a daily basis, they would not identify themselves with them.

They were conscious Jews, but their attitude to religion and self-identification through religion was subject to change. Since the Austro-Hungarian political situation was very favorable to Jewish citizens in the time of Joseph Wechsberg's early childhood, Wechsberg himself tends to look back to the pre WWI period with a certain portion of nostalgia and refer to it in *The Vienna I Knew* as to a golden age of Moravian Jewry. The comparison with the new-born Czechoslovakia comes out in favor of the monarchy. To a certain extent, the author Joseph Wechsberg tended to live and write under the impression of the "Habsburg myth"⁶⁴ quite well described by Steven Beller.

"Compared with what came afterwards, when national states indulged in demagogic and thus popular persecution of Jews, whether in Poland, Hungary, Romania, or even Austria itself, the Habsburg Monarchy, under the kindly gaze of Emperor Franz Josef, must indeed have looked like paradise to many, if not most Central European Jews."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ BELLER, Steven. Patriotism and the National Identity of Habsburg Jewry, 1860-1914. *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*. 1996, 41, 1, s. 215-238.

⁶⁵ BELLER, Steven. Patriotism and the National Identity of Habsburg Jewry, 1860-1914. *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*. 1996, 41, 1, s. 223

The comments of J.W. regarding the political and economic development in Czechoslovakia after WWII remind the reader of a lost world, the long-dead faded fame of a provincial town. This bitterness finds reflection in several quotations of *The Vienna I Knew*.

“Es war ein Fehler gewesen, hierherzukommen und nach irgendwas zu suchen, was nicht mehr existierte. Nur die Wände, die Tische, die Stühle waren geblieben. Nicht aber das, was man hätte hören oder beobachten können: die Stimmen, das Gelächter, die Gesichter. Ich schaute verzweifelt um mich, um wenigstens *etwas* zu finden, was mich in die Vergangenheit zurückführte, die nur zwanzig Jahre zurücklag, und plötzlich fühlte ich mich entsetzlich allein und voller Schuld. Warum saß ich hier, gerade ich, ein früher Chachar aus Ostrava? Weil ich Glück gehabt hatte, würden einige sagen, die weniger Glück gehabt hatten. Aber es machte mich nicht glücklich, hier zu sein. Ich war mir meiner tiefer Einsamkeit bewusst. Und ich hatte Angst, hier zu sein, von Geistern umgeben. Ich stand auf und ging zur Tür. Ich wusste, ich würde niemals zum Palace⁶⁶ zurückkehren, niemals. Und ich bin nicht zurückgekehrt.“⁶⁷

One thing is for sure: although the Wechsbergs had Czech staff and sometimes even Czech friends, the Czech or generally Slavic culture was either totally strange to them or perceived only as an ingredient in the giant melting pot Ostrava was. The ethnic and religious situation there was slightly different from the ones we know from other Moravian cities. Due to the great degree of industrialization and rapid urban growth, Mährisch Ostrau attracted people of all kinds of backgrounds who moved there in search of a job. In a smaller measure, Ostrava of the break of the century could be compared to the American melting pot. There were Czechs, Poles, Germans and Jews living together in relative harmony, although it would be a mistake to imagine a society without boundaries. The class system still formed very clear social definitions.

⁶⁶ Palace was a cafe in Ostrava, a very popular one before WWII, that still existed in the communist era.

⁶⁷ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.263

The Wechsbergs were thus representants of German speaking bourgeoisie with very pro-Austrian world views. It was not Prague the Wechsbergs looked up, to it was always Vienna. The cultural milieu was pronouncedly Austrian: the childhood heroes J.W. mentioned in *The Vienna I Knew* were Strauss and Schnitzler and Freud⁶⁸ and it was the Viennese lifestyle that the family wanted to mimic. They studied in Vienna and had their vacations in the favorite destinations of the Austrians. In fact, they were “more Viennese than the Viennese,” as Joseph Wechsberg claimed.

The Czech neighbors also found their place in *The Vienna I Knew*, but they were present in the figures of servants, superstitious maids and later on in the descriptions of the communist Czechoslovakia as very unhelpful staff. There are also good Czech characters featured, but they seem to play only a marginal role, with the exception of the Wechsberg house staff that is given some space within the autobiography.

“Eine Zeitlang hatten wir kein Mädchen, ..., aber dann kam Tonka. ...Tonka hatte nicht mal einen Freund. Ihr Vater war Bergarbeiter. Ihre Familie lebte in einem kleinen Appartement, wenn man das so überhaupt nennen konnte, nur eine Küche und ein kleines Zimmer für vier Menschen in einem der Bergarbeiterhäuser in den Kolonien. ... Trotzdem, Tonka war nicht perfekt, sie konnte nicht kochen, und meine Mutter dachte bald an mit einem sehnsüchtigen Seufzer an die Suppen und warmen Nachspeisen von Marie. Aber dann zuckte sie die Achseln und sagte: ”Man kann nicht alles haben.““⁶⁹

This corresponds with the theory of Moseley that it is the relatives and the house staff, which often influence the childhood of the author.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Although Freud is mentioned by Wechsberg, he only serves as a kind of an icon of the times and Wechsberg himself is far from any Freudian interpretations.

⁶⁹ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s. 46.

⁷⁰ MOSELEY, Marcus. Jewish Autobiography : The Elusive Subject. *Jewish Quarterly Review* [online]. 2005, vol. 95, no. 1 [cit. 2010-01-02], s. 16-59. Dostupný z WWW: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jewish_quarterly_review/v095/95.1moseley.pdf>.

The Polish element is missing, although it was present in the everyday life in Ostrava ever since the influx of workers from Galicia in the late 19th century.⁷¹ Also the orthodox Galician Jews are present in the form of three characters⁷², but more emphasis is put on the rather liberal Jewish friends and relatives of the Wechsbergs.

Since *The Vienna I Knew* is giving preference to and focusing mostly on the Austro-Hungarian citizenship and the glorification of the late years of the monarchy (that Wechsberg himself could not really have experienced much of), while the Jewish life and identity of the family is rather pushed into the background, although it does not go unmentioned. It was simply perceived as a part of what Čapková as a major Czech expert on this topic would identify as a plural identity, in this case an Austro-Hungarian and Jewish melted into one.⁷³

According to Wechsberg and his autobiography, there is one more possibility how to perceive the self-identification of the young Joseph Wechsberg. This phenomenon is closely connected with the age group that was paying much less attention to class or origin: the group of children and youth, that is.

While the parents and grandparents were clearly aware of the ethnic, religious and class distinctions (this was brilliantly described by J.W. on the example of separate cafe houses for each group), the children formed a unified mass, the mass of “Ostravan *chachars*.”⁷⁴ Wechsberg describes this phenomenon with a great accuracy:

⁷¹ ŠUSTKOVÁ, Hana. Haličan. In MYŠKA, Milan, ZÁŘICKÝ, Aleš. *Člověk v Ostravě v XIX.století*. 1. vyd. Ostrava : Nakladatelství Kazimierz Gajdzica, 2007. Haličan. s. 157-164. ISBN 9788073682156.

⁷² The Gronner brothers who owned a hotel and an orthodox schoolmate of Wechsberg's

⁷³ ČAPKOVÁ, Kateřina. *Češi, Němci, Židé : Národní identita Židů v Čechách 1918 - 1938*. Praha : Paseka, 2005. 353 s. ISBN 8071856959

⁷⁴ Chachar: a word used mainly for boys and young men within the Ostrava region. Ethymology is still unclear.

MARTÍNEK, Vojtěch. Chachar. *Naše řeč* [online]. 1942, roč. 26, č. 6 [cit. 2010-01-02], s. 191. Dostupný z WWW: <<http://nase-rec.ujc.cas.cz/archiv.php?vol=26#6>>.

“Wir waren stolz darauf Chacharen zu sein, es war ein Kennzeichen unserer Stadt...Wie auch immer die jugendlichen Spitzbuben sich anderswo anstellten, niemals würden sie Chacharen sein. Es gab sie nur in unserer Stadt...Vielleicht waren die Chacharen der Tatsache zu verdanken, dass Ostrava eine Kohlestadt war, eine Industriestadt...Der beste Zug an uns Chacharen war der völlige Mangel an Nationalgefühl. Unter uns gab es Tschechen, Deutsche, Ungarn und Slowaken, Juden, Christen und Atheisten. Niemand kümmerte sich darum.Wir hatten weder eine Organisation noch Satzungen, die ganze Sache war herrlich formlos.“⁷⁵

So could the “*chachars*“ easily be the new sub-identity, the product of “the Ostrava melting pot in which nobody really melted.”⁷⁶

The identity perception was definitively shattered by the outcome of WWI and the formation of Czechoslovakia. Also the pro-Austrian Jewish population the Wechsbergs belong to had to cope with the situation and find themselves within a new reality. Wechsberg or at least the boy he was at that time, noticed the changes first in his every day life and by the change of the main language spoken in Ostrava. All of a sudden, the cinemas and theatres played in Czech, but Wechsberg and his Jewish friends did not mind, since they all could understand Czech and speak it to some extent, although their mother tongue was prevalently German.

“Sprachlich war meine Heimatstadt ein komplexer Ort. Die Tschechen sprachen tschechisch, die Polen sprachen polnisch, die Deutschen sprachen deutsch und die Juden sprachen tschechisch im Finanzamt oder vor Gericht und deutsch untereinander,”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s. 164.-165.

⁷⁶ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s. 164.-165.

⁷⁷ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s. 164.

“Lange bevor das Wort ”liberal“ suspekt, ja beinahe schmutzig wurde, war man in Ostrau liberal gesonnen. Ich bin sicher, daß wenig Menschen in meiner Heimatstadt jemals von König Friedrich II. von Preußen gehört hatten, der dekretierte, daß in seinem Staat jedermann ”nach seiner Fassung“ glücklich werden solle, aber das war tatsächlich die allgemeine Auffassung in Ostrau. Tschechische Eltern schickten selbstverständlich ihre Kinder in die tschechische Schule, deutsche Eltern ihre in die deutsche Schule, und jüdische Eltern ihre in die jüdische Schule.“⁷⁸

Although the language was not the problem and the ethnicities and cultures were familiar with one another, the Jews of Mährisch Ostrau were rather sceptical towards the new development. So were the Wechsbergs and also Joseph’s Jewish schoolmates. They only started to identify themselves as Czechoslovak citizens after recognizing the first Czechoslovak president Masaryk as enough of a guarantee for the Jewish citizens. An interesting detail is that Wechsberg only started respecting the president after one of his grammar school teachers, who came originally from Polná, informed the class of Masaryk’s activities in the Polná⁷⁹ case.

There was also a shift in the model city that the provincial Ostrava tried to follow. While it had always been Prague for the Czechs, the German and Jewish population tended to look up to Vienna and send their children to schools there. This was not exactly a Germanizing effort of the Jews, as the Czech anti-Semites liked to verbalize it in the contemporary press⁸⁰,

⁷⁸ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.86.

⁷⁹ A case of suspected ritual murder that happened in the village of Polná in Bohemia in March 1899. A young woman Anežka Hružová was found dead with a wound on her neck that made the officials suspect that the murderer was a young Jewish man Leopold Hilsner. Under the social pressure of the public and escalating anti-Jewish riots, Hilsner was found guilty, although the evidence was less than convincing, and sentenced to a capital punishment. After the fierce protest of T.G.Masaryk, the Hilsner affair was revisited in 1900 and the capital punishment sentence was cancelled. In the revisited cause, however, Hilsner was sentenced to death again, this time also for a murder of another young woman (the evidence was more than dubious and chaotic again). This, however, was changed to a life-long prison sentence by the mercy of the emperor.

PAŘÍK, Arno. *Židovské muzeum v Praze* [online]. 1999 [cit. 2010-08-11]. Vražda v Polné. Dostupné z WWW: <<http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/cz/vystavy/czpolna.htm>>.

⁸⁰ KYSELÁ, Miroslava. *Jüdische Volksstimme 1919 - 1934 : Thematische und sprachliche Analyse*. Ostrava : Ostravská univerzita Ostrava, Filozofická fakulta, 2002. ISBN 8070426217. Die politischen Themen, s. 27-50.

but rather a realistic assumption, that an education in German would give the young person a broader scope of professional chances and would open the door for possible relocation.⁸¹ But also the Czech inhabitants of Ostrava sent their children to Viennese schools simply because it was equally as far to Prague as to Vienna.

The situation changed with the new borders. While Joseph's Father studied in Vienna, Joseph himself started attending university in Czechoslovakia already, so he pursued his juristic studies in Prague and learned to love and accept Prague, although Vienna still remained a fascinating point when it came to culture and entertainment. Generally, it seems like Wechsberg – although he did not have a problem with the Czechoslovak citizenship – stuck firmly with his Austro-Hungarian and German speaking cultural notion. Even though Wechsberg was willing to identify himself with Czechoslovakia of the pre WWII time, this is not true for what came after the war. From that point on, all that Wechsberg has for his hometown is bitterness and nostalgia for the days long gone. What he describes are the feelings of a stranger in a strange city and a strange country, as if it was not the very same place Wechsberg had left some ten years before.

⁸¹15 ČAPKOVÁ, Kateřina. *Češi, Němci, Židé : Národní identita Židů v Čechách 1918 - 1938*. Praha : Paseka, 2005. 353 s. ISBN 8071856959.

5. 4. From Grandfather Wechsberg to sausages and cocoa: Judaism on the crossroads

The question of religion is not a prominent one within the frame of *The Vienna I Knew*, but it does not go totally unmentioned. The way Wechsberg describes it gives the reader some basic information on the religious life of the family. The most interesting issue, however, is the metamorphosis of the Wechsbergs from a religious Jewish family into the three-day Jews and later on one step further towards a complete secularization. As Joseph Wechsberg laconically put it, this time in the words of Dr. Spira:

“Irgendwann könntest du einmal in die Synagoge kommen. Komm an einem Freitagabend. Der Gottesdienst dauert nicht lange. Dein Großvater kam oft. Er hat noch seinen Platz dort in der ersten Reihe, seinen Ehrenplatz. Jetzt ist er meistens leer. Dein Vater kam manchmal...”⁸²

After Grandfather Wechsberg established himself in Ostrava and started being economical successful, he took up several other functions that document that religious life was important for him – he was member of the kehila committee and one of the funders of Jewish religious life and education in Ostrava. This was connected to a prestigious place of honor in the synagogue that Grandfather Wechsberg had. It was not just the issue of a social status, according to *The Vienna I Knew*, Judaism was still a very important part the personal life of Albert Wechsberg.

Generally, Grandfather Wechsberg might be considered an observant Jew.

In Joseph Wechsberg's words:

” Mein verstorbener Großvater hatte den jüdischen Wohltätigkeitseinrichtungen in der Stadt großzügige Stiftungen gemacht. Wenn er an hohen Feiertagen aufgerufen

⁸² *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. 135p.

wurde, aus der Thora vorzulesen, verstummte das Flüstern in der Gemeinde, und alle blickten auf Dr. Spira, den Rabbi, der Großvaters edelmütige Stiftungen verkündete.“⁸³

As little as is written regarding the religious life of Albert Wechsberg and there are only press articles to complete the picture⁸⁴, even less attention was paid to the religious life of Siegfried and Minka Wechsberg, the parents of Joseph.

The author recollects going to the synagogue and celebrating Jewish holidays, but not for their religious meaning, but rather as a social or family event.

Joseph Wechsberg himself received some traditional Jewish education, but not one comparable to the orthodox chedarim.

”In der jüdischen Schule in Ostrau lernten wir, das Alte Testament im hebräischen Originaltext zu lesen. In unserer Synagoge beteten wir auf hebräisch. Alle Gebete wurden auf Hebräisch gesprochen. Aber die Predigt wurde von Dr.Spira in altertümlichem Deutsch gehalten, geschmückt mit hebräischen Zitaten und Talmud-Weisheit, was einige Zeit kostete, bis es durch ein ungeübtes Gehirn gedrunken war.“

85

His knowledge of Hebrew was very poor, if any.

⁸³ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.137.

⁸⁴ ŠÚSTKOVÁ, Hana. Osudy rodiny Wechsbergů. In Muzeum Kroměřížska. *Židé a Morava : Sborník z konference konané v Muzeu Kroměřížska dne 15. listopadu 2006*. Kroměříž : Muzeum Kroměřížska, 2007. s. 87-96. ISBN 9788085945508.

⁸⁵ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.92

” Da ich das jüngste männliche Wesen am Tisch war, las ich aus der Hagada:

”Warum ist diese Nacht verschieden von allen anderen Nächten?“ Das wurde alles auf Hebräisch gesagt, und ich verstand es gar nicht.“⁸⁶

Although he did not openly mention it in *The Vienna I Knew*, he went through the course of the primary education in the Jewish primary school in Kostelni street, Ostrava that his Grandfather co-funded.⁸⁷ The rest of his education was secular.

”Die jüdische öffentliche Schule, teilweise aus öffentlichen Mitteln und teilweise durch private Spenden finanziert – Großvater Wechsberg hatte zu den prominenten Stiftern gehört – hatte denselben Lehrplan wie tschechische und deutsche Schulen, nur mit besonderer Betonung der jüdischen Religion und der Erlernung der hebräischen Sprache. Für jüdische Kinder gab es nur eine Grundschule. Man war der Ansicht, daß bei Abschluß der vierklassigen Grundschule ein zehnjähriger Schüler genügend jüdische Erziehung genossen haben würde, um ihm eine Grundlage fürs Leben zu vermitteln; danach hatte er entweder die tschechische oder die deutsche weiterführende Schule zu besuchen.“⁸⁸

Although the Wechsbergs did go to the synagogue (the synagogue of Ostrava had some reform features, such as an organ)⁸⁹, they did not keep very many traditions and they were very benevolent to their son learning about other religious traditions. An interesting fact is, that they did not keep kosher at all, not even to a smaller degree. Joseph Wechsberg explicitly described of what his childhood diet consisted: sausages and cocoa. Also, he repeatedly point out that kashrut was not an issue in the household of Siegfried Wechsberg.

⁸⁶ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982.s. 139.

⁸⁷ Founded in 1863, in Kostelni 25 from 1864, teaching both Hebrew and secular subjects in German and Czech as a foreign language. In the late 30's the main teaching language changed into Czech under the leadership of principal Ota Pancer, who stayed in his position until WWII when the school ceased to exist anymore.

M. Otisk (ed.), *Město v nás. Příběhy ostravských Židů*, Ostrava: Montanex 2004. ISBN 80-7225-141-4. s.19.

⁸⁸ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.86

⁸⁹ more on the Jewish community of Ostrava in the previous chapters

According to the witnesses who were born and raised in Ostrava, this was not an exceptional phenomenon among the Jews of Ostrava in the time of Joseph's youth.

”Unsere Familie war nicht sehr religiös. Meine Mutter pflegte am Freitagabend die Kerzen in den barocken Kerzenhaltern anzuzünden, aber sie sagte sie tue es nur aus Pietät. Bei uns zu Hause gab es kein koscheres Essen. Einmal schalt mich ein Klassenkamerad, ein orthodoxer Jude, weil ich Würstel und Schinken aß... Alles in allem hatten wir ein entspanntes Verhältnis zum religiösen Ritual.“⁹⁰

The relationship of the younger Wechsbergs to the religion did not seem to be influenced by any specific program, such as Reform Judaism. The case of the Wechsbergs could be explained by the theory proposed by Hillel J. Kieval, that unlike German Jews, Czech Jews did not adopt any practices out of a positive religious conviction, but rather out of an indifference to religion as such.⁹¹

As casual as the family might have been in the religious affairs, they still stressed the Jewish tradition, wisdom and history as a legacy, rather than a code to live by. Later into the 1920's, some of the broader Wechsberg family even converted to Christianity, but rather to achieve a better social status than from a bona fide religious conviction.

”Die Juden in Ostrau waren nach Wien orientiert, und Wien steckte voll von getauften Juden, die sich – wenn auch erfolglos – sehr darum bemühten, ihre Vergangenheit zu vergessen. Meine Mutter sagte einmal, wenn Onkel Alfred – ein älterer Bruder meines Vaters, der in der Wohnung unter uns wohnte – mit seiner Frau nach Wien ginge, ”sich Tante Anna bestimmt mit allen Mittel darum bemühen würde, einen Herrn von Wechsberg aus ihm zu machen.“⁹²

⁹⁰ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982.s. 139.

⁹¹ KIEVAL, Hillel J. *The Making of Czech Jewry : National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870-1918* (*Studies in Jewish History*. [s.l.] : Oxford University Press, 1988. 296 s. ISBN 0195040570.

⁹² *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982.s. 93

This phenomenon in Ostrava is contrasting to the picture of the Jews who came as World War I refugees from Galicia and who were representants of the eastern type of Ashkenazic Judaism. They were Yiddish speaking orthodox Jews, but also the ones who stayed mostly melted in the Ostrava environment. Wechsberg illustrates their fate on the example of the Gronner brothers, the owners of the prestigious Cafe Palace in Ostrava, who came with the Galician influx and established their successful business there.⁹³ As economically successful as they might have been, they were still looked down upon by the "old" Ostravans and mocked, that they "could not even write their names and never heard the word literature"⁹⁴, was supposed to show how backwards the Galician newcomers seemed to be to the established Ostravans.

The Vienna I Knew contains enthusiastic reports on the lectures of Dr. Spira⁹⁵, a prominent personality within the Jewish community of Mährisch Ostrau.

Excited as young Joseph was about the classes and wisdom of Dr. Spira, there was something else in the rich, multicultural life in Ostrava, that the boy liked even more: catholic churches, that was. Jews and Christians lived close to each other and they could see the religious life of their neighbors first hand. Also little Joseph Wechsberg managed to explore the ritus of the Christians, when attending the holy mass with his pious nanny/housekeeper Marie, to the slight discontent of his mother.

The church visits, however impressive they were, did not distract Joseph from following his own path of Judaism under the gentle and sophisticated leadership of Dr. Spira. Judaism stayed a linking chain for Wechsberg also in his adult years and during his travels.

⁹³ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.234.

⁹⁴ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.238.

⁹⁵ Rabbi and teacher Dr. Jakob Spira, a rabbi in Moravská Ostrava from 1894.

M. Otisk (ed.), *Město v nás. Příběhy ostravských Židů*, Ostrava: Montanex 2004. ISBN 80-7225-141-4.s 20.

” Die liturgischen Vorgänge waren nicht so geheimnisvoll wie in der Alten Kirche, aber eine streng kabbalistische Atmosphäre wurde von alten Männern im Hintergrund übermittelt, die mit ihrem Tallith wie mit einem Schal um den Nacken beteten. Es war ein orthodoxer Gottesdienst, und jeder trug einen Hut. Als ich nach New York kam und eine reformierte Synagoge betrat, wurde ich aufgefordert, meinen Hut abzulegen. Ich hatte nicht gewußt, daß es solch einen Gottesdienst gab.“⁹⁶

The short period of Joseph’s enthusiasm for Judaism found a very benevolent, yet calm reception. It was rather a surprised wondering than joy his mother expressed after the repeated visits of young Joseph in the Ostravan synagogue. For her were the visits rather a social event, a chance to gossip about the other women and act as if she was despising just that.

The Vienna I Knew recorded an anecdote of Hermina Wechsberg attending the synagogue on Yom Kippur.

” Gewöhnlich blieb sie am Jom Kippur, bis jemand in Ohnmacht fiel. Das war der Höhepunkt ihres persönlichen Ritual. Nach der Kol Nidre-Mahlzeit am vorangegangenen Abend sollte man nichts mehr zu sich nehmen, und an warmen Tagen waren manche Frauen gegen Mittag so geschwächt, daß sie ohnmächtig wurden. Einmal wurde niemand ohnmächtig. Meine Mutter war der Ansicht, der Gottesdienst sei enttäuschend gewesen.“⁹⁷

⁹⁶ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.137.

⁹⁷ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.138.

Everything quoted before is showing the picture of a higher middle class Jewish family of the western type of Ashkenazic Judaism as formulated by Ezra Mendelssohn⁹⁸ - that is, a community showing a higher level of assimilation, the abandonment of orthodoxy and adopting a different, liberal type of Judaism.

So has the religious life of the Wechsberg transformed from the traditional, orthodox one of their Grandfather to the more liberal one that still did not show a complete abandonment of Judaism, but rather its re-identification and a shift into more symbolic levels.

⁹⁸ MENDELSSOHN, Ezra. *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1982. 320 s. ISBN 0253204186.

5.5. From the old monarchy into the new reality: the Wechsbergs between two worlds

As the author of the thesis mentioned in the introduction, the Wechsbergs, like many other of their Jewish contemporaries, were enthusiastic followers and devoted citizens of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. How exactly it showed in the everyday life of the Wechsbergs and their worldviews is to be illustrated further on.

The loyalty to the monarchy was reaching further than to simple adoration of Vienna and the Viennese culture. The citizenship of the Austro-Hungarian empire was a matter of personal pride. So was the similarity of Albert Wechsberg, the Grandfather, to the Emperor run up with a great vigor every time there was a chance and it served as yet another proof of Albert Wechsberg's honor and credibility.

”Großvater Albert Wechsberg war 1827 geboren, drei Jahre vor dem Kaiser, wie man in unserer Familie sagte. Der Kaiser was Franz Joseph I. Als er geboren wurde, war er nur Erzherzog, aber er wurde schon im zarten Alter von achtzehn Jahren Kaiser. Großvater Wechsberg war sechsundachtzig, als er 1913 starb, wiederum drei Jahre vor dem Kaiser. Meine Mutter versäumte nie, auf die geheimnisvolle Beziehung zwischen Großvater und dem Kaiser hinzuweisen. Alle wichtigen Daten in unserer Familie wurden auf den Kaiser bezogen.“⁹⁹

The figure of Franz Joseph I. was an iconic one for the Jewish middle class in Ostrava as it was for the Germans in Ostrava, who were also mostly pro-monarchist. As Wechsberg himself mentioned: ”Franz Joseph I. was THE

⁹⁹ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.16.

Emperor.“ The popularity of Emperor Karl I. never reached the adoration of his ancestor. While the German speaking milieu adopted Franz Joseph as the sacrosanct idol, whom nobody dared to doubt or question, the Czech peers were showing a different attitude.

”Wir hatten immer Wien, nicht Prag, als unsere geistliche Hauptstadt angesehen. Aber im tschechischen Gymnasium, nur zwei Häuserblocks entfernt, hatten die Schüler Kaiser Franz Joseph einen senilen Idioten genannt.“¹⁰⁰

”Unser Schönbrunn¹⁰¹ hatte mit dem Wiener Sommerpalast des Kaisers nichts gemeinsam als den Namen. Die Tschechen nannten Schönbrunn respektlos ”Svinov“, möglicherweise, weil es klang wie ”svině“, die Sau. Die Tschechen konnten mit dem Kaiser nichts anfangen und nannten ihn ”Proháska“, ein häufig vorkommender tschechischer Name, besonders wenn sie in Gegenwart der österreichischen Polizei Witze über ”Proháska“ erzählten.“¹⁰²

Another example of the devotion of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia would be the fact, that a great number of them visited the synagogue not three times for the high holidays, but four times – for the high holidays and the Emperor’s birthday.¹⁰³

The loyalty to the monarchy was not demonstrated only by the worshipping of the Kaiser, but also by the fact, that the Wechsbergs were serving in the army, were proud of it and reached a high ranking in the army. A good example of it is uncle Eugen, one of the sons of Grandfather Albert – he served in Český Těšín and acted like the proverbial Austro-Hungarian officer, which was the source of many humorous family stories and severe bitterness further on. Not only they served, but in they also lost their lives for the monarchy,

¹⁰⁰ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.223.

¹⁰¹ Schönbrunn is a German name of a neighborhood in Ostrava, the Czech name is Svinov

¹⁰² *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.40-45.

¹⁰³ ČAPKOVÁ, Kateřina. *Češi, Němci, Židé : Národní identita Židů v Čechách 1918 - 1938*. Praha : Paseka, 2005. ISBN 8071856959. s. 19.

just as the Father of Joseph, Siegfried Wechsberg did. He fell in Word War I on the Galician front in a heroic, but rather absurd military operation.

Yet another fact about the Wechsberg family clearly shows how much trust they put in the monarchy. As Joseph Wechsberg mentions several times within *The Vienna I Knew*, the Austro-Hungarian Empire made an impression of an imperishable colossus and the mere thought of it collapsing seemed nothing less than absurd. This assumption eventually lead the Ostravan Wechsbergs into bankruptcy, since they invested most of their resources into war loans, of which they thought they would definitely pay off after the monarchy would have won the war. Unfortunately for the Wechsbergs, this was not the case and the Wechsberg lost their business and most of their savings, too. This shattered not only their material world, but also the value system and the image of the almighty monarchy they invested so much hope and trust into.

When Czechoslovakia was established in 1918, the Wechsbergs had to come to terms with the new situation. Some of them moved to Vienna and pursued their happiness there, while Joseph, his Mother and his brother Max stayed in Ostrava. They never lost their fascination for Vienna and the “good old times”, but in spite of this, they had to face the changes.

”Nach 1918 sagte meine Mutter, daß Wien ”am Ende“ sei. Ich verstand das nicht. Die große Stadt war doch noch da, die Barockpaläste, die Kirchen, das Burgtheater, die breiten Straßen? Meine Mutter schüttelte den Kopf. Ich war eben ein Kind; ich konnte das nicht verstehen. Jetzt verstehe ich es. Wien war nur noch eine große Stadt, nicht mehr eine Welt für sich, wie meine Mutter sie dort gefunden hatte. Einst waren die Menschen zu einer Pilgerfahrt nach Wien aufgebrochen, um den Zauber der Kaiserstadt zu erleben. Jetzt war der Zauber nicht mehr da, und der Kaiser war nicht mehr da.“¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.81.

Joseph Wechsberg was 11 years old in 1918. He describes the historical event from the perspective of a young boy with following words:

“ Ich war Schüler der Klasse 2B im Gymnasium, gegen Ende des Jahres 1918, als das Bild von Kaiser Karl I. aus unserem Klassenzimmer entfernt wurde....Nach einer Weile erschien an der Wand das Bild eines bärtigen Mannes mit einem Kneifer. Darunter stand: Tomáš G. Masaryk, Präsident der tschechoslowakischen Republik.“¹⁰⁵

As cliché as it sounds, it is Masaryk that Wechsberg gives the key role in his acceptance of Czechoslovakia as a safe old-new home. The whole process was not overnight, but Wechsberg gradually re-oriented himself from Vienna to Prague.

”Meine Persönliche Wandlung vollzog sich mehrere Jahre später in Prag, wo ich mich schließlich mehr zu Hause fühlte als in Wien.“¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.223.

¹⁰⁶ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.223.

5.6. The black and the golden: The image of Ostrava and Vienna

While serving in the army and adoring the Emperor were some of the facts proving the very pro-Austrian orientation of the Wechsbergs, the theme interlacing not only *The Vienna I Knew*, but the whole bulk of Wechsberg's work. He comes back to Vienna in several of his publications. This excitement for the Austrian capital could easily be identified as a "family disease" of the Wechsberg clan, a part of the family culture, but not only that: in fact, looking up to Vienna was one of the integral features in the Jewish community of Ostrava. The ones, who really wanted to achieve something in life, moved to Vienna, because the act of moving to Vienna itself was taken as a stepping stone of life success. As Wechsberg remarked: "Vienna was full of baptized Ostravan Jews."¹⁰⁷ Although there were many successful and well established businesses in Ostrava with owners that did not have a reason to complain, the real achievers in the eyes of the city moved to Vienna.

The Vienna I Know demonstrates the longing of the provincial Jews to enter the high society in Vienna on the story of one of Wechsberg's uncles, uncle Alfred Wechsberg, the "favorite brother" of Joseph's Father. It was the same uncle who was solely responsible for investing the family fortune into the war loans and who then took whatever was left of the Wechsberg money and escaped to Vienna while reassuring the rest of the family that the finances were in the best hands. Soon he bought shares of the Lombard & Escompte Bank and thus received a chance to have a good position within the bank and an open door to the social cream of Vienna. Of course, this was well into the 1920's when Austria experienced a short-lived prosperity right before a tragic fall and years of crisis that ultimately swept away even the ingenious Alfred Wechsberg and his family.

In fact, the initiator of the whole Vienna career of Alfred might have been his wife Anna, who came from much humbler conditions and who felt a great desire to climb up into the

¹⁰⁷ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.223.

higher social spheres. The whole family of Alfred Wechsberg converted to Christianity in order to belong to the "real" Viennese society and to marry their daughter Edith off to an impoverished nobleman.¹⁰⁸ The entire story ended up a complete disaster, a "family curse", as Joseph's mother called it. Uncle Alfred lost all of his resources to the crisis, Edith divorced the nobleman, who was not noble at all, just to marry a medical doctor in Ostrava. The second marriage, however, was not a happy one either and Edith committed suicide in hotel Imperial in Ostrava, supposedly along with her lover, making a welcome prey for the local press.¹⁰⁹

Alfred's wife Anna died shortly after and Alfred himself moved back to Ostrava where he died. Their son Raoul could not cope with his Father's death and jumped out of the window. All of this is a story that Wechsberg heard second-hand and re-interpreted it in *The Vienna I Knew*. The point marking the fall of the house of Alfred Wechsberg was neither the death of Anna, nor the suicide of Edith. It was the return to Ostrava. Besides that, if some terrible event was bound to happen in *The Vienna I Knew*, it was almost always set in Ostrava, just like the death of Edith or the suicide of yet another uncle of Joseph's, uncle Max. Vienna was the center of life and happiness, Ostrava was a location where the real life started, not slightly as exciting and fashionable as the one in Vienna.

Vienna was a place of cultural refuge from the everyday life in Ostrava, as Wechsberg describes it on the example of his mother, who set out once a year to visit her relative in Vienna for a week before she got married to Siegfried Wechsberg. This time in Vienna was known among the Wechsbergs as "The Week in Vienna" and was of special importance for Hermina Wechsberg, a sort of a status symbol, but also a simple escape from the monotonous days in Ostrava and a source of stories she told little Joseph and his brother that

¹⁰⁸ for more reference and historical background of intermarriage in Vienna, see ROZENBLIT, Marsha. *The Jews of Vienna, 1867-1914 : assimilation and identity*. Albany : State University of New York Press, 1983. 284 s.

¹⁰⁹ Sebevražda vídeňské baronky v Ostravě. *České slovo*. 8.11.1935
Ostrauer Zeitung. 8.11.1935

helped create a Vienna legend that penetrated deep into the memory of Joseph Wechsberg, the Jew from Ostrava and the works of Joseph Wechsberg, the author.

Although the majority society in Vienna accepted Jews well, at least the ones who belonged to a middle class, the coalescence still was not total, at least not according to the memories of Joseph Wechsberg. He explains the status of the Jews in Vienna as the one of "people in between", not totally different, but also not yet fully integrated into the society.

Even if some of the Jews tried to seek full assimilation by means of a conversion to Christianity or gaining an aristocratic title, the overall acceptance by the Gentile society of Vienna, that showed in small particularities, just like the wedding of Edith Wechsberg to a nobleman.

"Ich hörte, daß Anna die Hochzeit in einer der älteren Kirchen haben wollte, in der Augustinerkirche oder im Stephansdom. Aber die kirchlichen Autoritäten ließen es nicht zu. Edith war erst kurz vor der Hochzeit getauft worden."¹¹⁰

Wechsberg finds reference of this in the works of A. Schnitzler and his description of the shiny decay of the bourgeois society in Vienna.

"Die heikle Wechselwirkung psychologischer Beziehungen zwischen denen, die die noch einen festen Rückhalt hatten, und den beinah-Leuten, die ihres Hintergrundes gewahr blieben, ist ein wiederkehrendes Thema bei Schnitzler."¹¹¹

There is a constant reminder of the times to come in *The Vienna I Knew*, such as the comment of Hermina Wechsberg that "nobel geht die Welt zugrunde." Wechsberg portrays the end of the golden era of Vienna with a great nostalgia and with the observation, which

¹¹⁰ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.202 -203.

¹¹¹ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.57.

although the destruction of the good old ways of life of the Jewish bourgeois society was soon to come, nobody at that time seemed to have noticed that or to have accepted that as a fact. Not even Siegfried Wechsberg himself, as he left for the front straight from his vacation in Meran, a favorite holiday resort of the Austro-Hungarian higher middle class.

Ostrava, a mere provincial town, however progressive it might have been, could not catch up with the glamorous life of Vienna and its attraction, although Ostrava tried very hard to do so. Wechsberg brilliantly sketches out those Ostravan attempts in his vivid descriptions of the "Kaffeehauskultur" both in the Austro-Hungarian Mährisch Ostrau and in the Ostrava of the early Czechoslovak years. Cafes in Ostrava were not only a simple place of refreshment, it was a status symbol and a marker of social class and even ethnic distinction earlier and a world-view later. The people were judged according to the cafe they were regulars in.

By far the most fascinating coffee house of Ostrava was Cafe Palace adjacent to a hotel of the same name, both run by the Gronner brothers, who came to Ostrava with the Galician wave of immigration. It was a modern business filled with rich social life, a world in a world with its own hierarchy of regulars and an unwritten rule to keep the strangers away. Cafe Palace was a meeting point among the religions and ethnicities, a melting pot in the right sense of the word and a platform of religious and social equality. As Wechsberg remarked: "Nobody was too poor to order a cup of coffee in Cafe Palace."¹¹²

There were other places connected to the life of Joseph Wechsberg's parents that Joseph adopted and declared his own, such as hotel Bristol in Vienna or vacations in Meran. The Wechsbergs were very patriotic citizens of the Austro-Hungarian empire and later on, also loyal citizens of Czechoslovakia. The cultural orientation, however, always stayed rather Austrian.

¹¹² *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.287.

Whatever was left during the first Czechoslovak republic, World War II destroyed completely. The world of the Wechsbergs in that region ceased to exist and as Wechsberg himself claims, there was nothing left of the Ostrava he grew up in.

”Ich könnte nicht zu dem Haus in Ostrava, wo ich meine Kindheit verbrachte und aufwuchs, zurückkehren. Das gegenwärtige Regime würde mich nicht willkommen heißen. Und es ist nicht mehr der Ort, den ich kannte. Ein Ort, das bedeutet nicht nur Häuser und Straßen und Plätze, es bedeutet Menschen. Die Menschen, die ich dort gekannt habe, sind nicht mehr da. Einige sind friedlich gestorben (stirbt irgendjemand friedlich?), und andere sind verschwunden, wie man so sagt.“¹¹³

¹¹³ *Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters*: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. s.101.

6. Conclusion

Joseph Wechsberg came a long way from a little Jewish boy from a provincial town into a true cosmopolitan and world citizen he was a grown-up man. Ostrava and the “Habsburg myth”¹¹⁴, however, stayed in his blood and his literature all through his life. The Wechsberg family served as a good example of the life and worldviews of the higher middle class Jews in Ostrava and helped point out the specifics of the city, just as the city helped point out the specifics of the Wechsbergs. Joseph Wechsberg lived and wrote all through the turbulent 20th century and across the continents, but in his very self, he stayed an Ostravan *chachar*.

¹¹⁴ BELLER, Steven. Patriotism and the National Identity of Habsburg Jewry, 1860-1914. *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*. 1996, 41, 1, s. 215.

Anotace:

Jméno a příjmení:	Magdaléna Stárková
Katedra:	Centrum judaistických studií Kurta a Ursuly Schubertových
Vedoucí práce:	Prof. PhDr. Ingeborg Fialová, Dr.
Rok obhajoby:	2010

Název práce:	Joseph Wechsberg: mezi Ostravou, Vídní a velkým světem
Název v angličtině:	Joseph Wechsberg: Between Ostrava, Vienna and the Whole Wide World .
Anotace práce:	Práce se opírá o Wechsbergovu autobiografii <i>The Vienna I Knew/ Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters</i> a její záměrem je na příkladu J. Wechsberga a jeho rodiny popsat a analyzovat život židovské vyšší střední třídy v Ostravě ve světle politických změn prvních tří dekad 20. století.
Klíčová slova:	Wechsberg, Ostrava, Židé, Rakousko-Uhersko, autobiografie, Československo
Anotace v angličtině:	The thesis is using the autobiography of Joseph Wechsberg <i>Vienna I Knew/ Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters</i> as a key text to describe and analyze the life of the Wechsberg family and the life of the higher middle class Jewish Ostravans in the first three decades of the 20th century.
Klíčová slova v angličtině:	Wechsberg, Ostrava, Jews, Habsburg Monarchy, autobiography, Czechoslovakia
Přílohy vázané v práci:	Rodina Wechsbergů - genealogie
Rozsah práce:	83 stran
Jazyk práce:	anglický

LITERATURE:

Primary:

České Slovo

Die Manschettenknöpfe meines Vaters: Joseph Wechsberg, [*The Vienna I Knew*; transl. Carter Kniffler]. Hugendubel, 1982. 294p.

Joseph Wechsberg tot. *Die Presse*. 4.4. 1983.

Ostrauer Zeitung

Obituary. *The New Yorker*. 25.4.1983.

The Vienna I Knew (Memories of a European Childhood): Joseph Wechsberg, 1979; Doubleday & Co., hardcover.

Secondary:

BELLER, Steven. Patriotism and the National Identity of Habsburg Jewry, 1860-1914. *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*. 1996, 41, 1, s. 215-238.

BENZ, Wolfgang. The Legend of German-Jewish Symbiosis. *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*. 1992, 37, 1, s. 95-102.

ČAPKOVÁ, Kateřina. *Češi, Němci, Židé : Národní identita Židů v Čechách 1918 - 1938*. Praha : Paseka, 2005. 353 s. ISBN 8071856959

DUBNOW, Simon. *History of the Jews : From the Congress of Vienna to the Emergence of Hitler*. New York : A.S. Barnes and Co, 1973. 915 s.

GOLD, Hugo. *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Mährens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart : Ein Sammelwerk*. Brünn : Jüdischer Buch- und Kunstverlag, 1929. 623 s.

KESTENBERG-GLADSTEIN, Ruth. The Jews between Czechs and Germans in the Historic Lands : 1848-1918. In *The Jews of Czechoslovakia*. Philadelphia-New York : Jewish Pub. Society, 1968. s. 21-71.

KIEVAL, Hillel J. *The Making of Czech Jewry : National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870-1918 (Studies in Jewish History)*. [s.l.] : Oxford University Press, 1988. 296 s. ISBN 0195040570.

KYSELÁ, Miroslava. *Jüdische Volksstimme 1919 - 1934 : Thematische und sprachliche Analyse*. Ostrava : Ostravská univerzita Ostrava, Filozofická fakulta, 2002. ISBN 8070426217. Die politischen Themen, s. 27-50.

M. Otisk (ed.), *Město v nás. Příběhy ostravských Židů*, Ostrava: Montanex 2004. ISBN 80-7225-141-4. 85 s.

MARTÍNEK, Vojtěch. Chachar. *Naše řeč* [online]. 1942, roč. 26, č. 6 [cit. 2010-01-02], s. 191. Dostupný z WWW: <<http://nase-rec.ujc.cas.cz/archiv.php?vol=26#6>>.

MENDELSSOHN, Ezra. *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1982. 320 s. ISBN 0253204186.

MOSELEY, Marcus. Jewish Autobiography : The Elusive Subject. *Jewish Quarterly Review* [online]. 2005, vol. 95, no. 1 [cit. 2010-01-02], s. 16-59. Dostupný z WWW: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jewish_quarterly_review/v095/95.1moseley.pdf>.

REINHARZ, Jehuda. Jewish Nationalism and Jewish Identity in Central Europe. *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*. 1992, 37, 1, s. 147-167.

RECHTER, David. A Nationalism of Small Things : Jewish Autonomy in Late Habsburg Austria. *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*. 2007, 52, 1, s. 87-109.

ROZENBLIT, Marsha. *The Jews of Vienna, 1867-1914 : assimilation and identity*. Albany : State University of New York Press, 1983. 284 s.

SORKIN, David. Emancipation and Assimilation Two Concepts and their Application to German-Jewish History. *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*. 1990, 35, 1, s. 17-33

ŠÚSTKOVÁ, Hana. Haličan. In MYŠKA, Milan, ZÁŘICKÝ, Aleš. *Člověk v Ostravě v XIX.století*. 1. vyd. Ostrava : Nakladatelství Kazimierz Gajdzica, 2007. Haličan. s. 157-164. ISBN 9788073682156.

ŠÚSTKOVÁ, Hana. Osudy rodiny Wechsbergů. In Muzeum Kroměřížska. *Židé a Morava : Sborník z konference konané v Muzeu Kroměřížska dne 15. listopadu 2006*. Kroměříž : Muzeum Korměřížska, 2007. s. 87-96. ISBN 9788085945508.

ŠTĚPA, Václav Vznik židovské obce v Moravské Ostravě. In *Moravští Židé v Rakousko-uherské monarchii (1780-1918) : XXVI. Mikulovské sympozium : 24.-25. října 2000.*

Mikulov : Státní okresní archiv Břeclav, 2003. s. 1-10. ISBN 80-7275-017-8.

TOURY, Jacob. Jewish Townships in the German-Speaking Parts of the Austrian Empire — Before and After the Revolution of 1848/1849. *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*. 1986, 26, 1, s. 55-72.

WLASCHEK, Rudolf . *Biographia Judaica Bohemiae*. Dortmund : Forschungsstelle Ostmitteleuropa, 1995. 175 s. ISBN 978-3923293575.

E-sources:

PAŘÍK, Arno. *Židovské muzeum v Praze* [online]. 1999 [cit. 2010-08-11]. Vražda v Polné. Dostupné z WWW: <<http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/cz/vystavy/czpolna.htm>>.

SINGER, Kristina. *Joseph Wechsberg* [online]. 2007 [cit. 2010-08-10]. Joseph Wechsberg. Dostupné z WWW: <<http://www.josephwechsberg.com>>.

Photos

All photos used come from the personal family archive of Mr. Daniel Wechsberg