

Baron's family

John von Leonhardi's memories of his family life in Banka



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Introduction

There is no better place to start a story than at the beginning. My great grandfather Baron Alban von Leonhardi grew up in Saxony. Around two hundred and fifty years ago the family were given the title of Baron with an erb (a coat of arms) with seven points on the crown. He was made a commander of a fortress Konigsberg in Saxony close to Leipzig. At some later point he was made a general. Alban married Countess Mengersun from Saxony. His son Kurt was my grandfather. Kurt married Maria Haase. His son Anton was my father who is central to my story.

Anton was born in Nitra in 1898. He married Alzbeta Winterova, the daughter of Ludvic Winter. They married in 1926 in the little church next to the Kolonade bridge in Piestany. Soon after they moved from Sarfia, the family seat, to Banka until 1949. Banka was home, sweet home for me and my family. It is important I tell you my father tried everything possible to ensure we could remain in Banka and not have to leave. I will tell this difficult part of my story a little later...

My early life in Banka

I was born in a hospital in Vienna in 1933 and as an infant was taken by my parents back to our home in Banka where I grew up. Banka was my home and I feel as if it always will be. Our home was a manor house attached to the farm. It had a beautiful garden in the front with rose trees, ornamental shrubs and tall spruces and other trees surrounding a large lawn on which I loved to play. The garden was shielded from the road by flowering bushes. Across the main road was our market garden which supplied vegetables and fruit for us and others.

Behind the house was a very large garden with big fruit trees. It was on a slope bordered on one side by Gedra and the other two sides by the Horny dvor (farm). The chicken house was close to the small building for the pigs who got very fat from the food remains from the house and the market garden.

The farm was in two parts, the Horny dvor and Dolny dvor (upper and lower farms). In the Horny dvor the land rose gradually. This was a favourite place for me to slide down on a sledge in the winter months and play with my friends in the warmer weather. We would climb the fruit trees especially the cherry trees. My hands and face would be dyed dark red from eating the bounties we picked.

Further away down in the village, the cows were kept in a very large cow shed where they were fed and milked. As you entered the farm the managers house was on the left. His name was Pan Karaba. His son Rudko became a good friend of mine. There were a number of houses going up the slope. Gusti the chauffeur lived in the house next door to the manager. The next few houses housed the people who worked on the farm. The family Behan lived in the last house. Their son Peter was also a very good friend of mine. Further up the hill were the horse stables and a large shed to house the straw and feed for the horses. To the right on top of the hill was a building for the cabinet maker and the blacksmith. I spent many an hour watching the blacksmith shoe the horses and watched the cabinet maker fix the carriages.



The baby in the grass is me with Agnes leaning over me



I am a two year old in this image taken at Opi's home, Zeleny Strom. It was taken in the garden in Ludvics home in Zeleny Strom.

The yard beyond had the root vegetables covered with straw and soil for winter use. Further along there was a farm gate to enter and exit the farmland (Gedra). I loved this farm with all my heart, it was my life and heartbeat. My father also had a deep love for this part of the world.

My father was a patron of the church. We were very involved in many events and ceremonies that occurred at the church. Banka was my home and it will always feel in my heart to be my home. For me, it felt as if it was the best place in the world.

My earliest memory is of my nurse (nanny) looking after me. My mother helped her father at the spa. She was involved in administrating the spa hospitals, market gardens and milk supplies before and during the war. When she worked from home, I was happy because I was able to play in our office alongside her. My nanny stayed in my life until I was ready for school.

At home I spoke German with my mother and German and Slovakian with my father. My parents spoke with each other in Hungarian which was my mother's home language. I became quite good at understanding Hungarian so that I could find out what they were talking about!

I was an only child so sought friendship from the boys who lived on the estate. Generally, I was obedient, it was expected of me. I soon got into trouble if I broke any of the rules set for me. As a small child my mother would reprimand me sternly if I erred in any way.

My father taught me to respect others and to be humble. I was a fairly quiet boy who loved to play outdoors. I loved the forest and on occasions, went hunting with my father, he taught me to take great care of any gun that was being used during the hunting trips.

I loved playing football. In the early days we would kick around anything that resembled a ball before we had access to a real football. I played for the local village, we organized our own games and would ride our bikes to the other villages to play football against their teams. I was around 14 to almost 16 years of age during this period and generally played in the full back position. Every match was interesting, I enjoyed playing football with the village boys and had a lot fun riding to the villages to play the games. Two boys whose names I can remember were Rudko Karaba and Cirka who lived next to the Banka school.

I attended elementary school in Piestany for 4 years and later the gymnasium. I think the school at Banka was just being built. As I mentioned earlier, pressure was put on my parents to send me to a German school, though they preferred a Jesuit college for me, but with the state of the world including the political situation, my parents were determined to keep me at home.

Ivan Komlosi was one of my school friends, he lived with us because his father was the forester.

I started swimming and playing water polo in the summer. My special friend was Lacko Bacik. In the winter months we would play football and go skiing on the hill close to Banka – “na Ahoj”.



*The image of me
in a sailor's outfit
was taken at Banks*



*Me with Andreas Schulz, son of Paul Schultz and Agnes Schultz, nee Winter. Sadly Agnes died
in the concentration camp as my story indicated.*

My father

My father was a tall statuesque man who was very kind and passionate about his family and the people in the village. He was deeply connected to the farm and forest land surrounding Banka and our family seat in Sarfia. I looked up to my father who not only took care of me and my mother, but also the people who worked for him.



My father returning from hunting in the forest

One memory that sticks out in my mind takes me back to one day, when on returning from school I found all my clothes and belongings across my bedroom floor. One of my father's staff said to me, "Your father has said you are to clean up your room before he returns and to remember the staff are here to assist him to run the house and not to clean up after you." It was a powerful lesson of having respect for others, to embrace humility and self-discipline. These lessons I learned in one instant.

My father along with my mother, regularly entertained friends who lived locally and further afield in Austria, Germany, Prague in Czechoslovakia and Budapest in Hungary. He would also entertain people visiting the spa including those visiting from India and all over Europe. Some of the entertainment occurred at the Thermia Palace and other venues in and around Piestany. I heard from my mother he would visit Vienna and meet up with friends. He would often stay at the Hotel Bristol. They would discuss the situation in Europe and the impact on families such as ours.

Indeed, my father was a popular man by all accounts. He also enjoyed playing cards with his friends. I still have the card table he played the card games on. He travelled a lot to meet up with friends many of whom also had titles and large properties to take care of. They helped each other out especially as the war loomed. As a young man, he was sent to a military college and later served as an officer in Saxony during the 1st world war.

Other people tried to influence my father to send me to a German college but he refused saying the schools in Germany were politically oriented. Instead, my parents wanted me close by to make sure I was safe.

I remember my father helping people from the villages whenever there were situations occurring. I was told by a significant family in Banka that he gave her father a parcel of land to divide amongst her siblings so they each had land to build their houses on. Recently when we visited Banka, the daughter shared this story with me with obvious pride and deep respect and feelings for my father. I was also told he made a significant contribution to the purchase of an organ for the church. This was almost his last act before we left... I feel deep emotion remembering this. I was still a young boy of fifteen. I had no idea what was in front of us.

My mother

My earliest memories of my mother include being hugged by her and spending time with her. She would spend time with me to teach me about life. I remember the ease in which she was able to switch languages without hesitation. She spoke fluent French from her time studying in Paris. Her German was quite classic, sounding similar to the way my father spoke German. Naturally, this was to be the way I would speak the language in the future. Her mother tongue was Hungarian which she refrained from using with me.

I recall my mother being a very busy woman who always found time to listen to any of the local people who would come to her with their concerns. She knew all the doctors who worked at the spa and hospitals. I believe she sometimes worked at the hospital for the returned soldiers.

She had a deep interest in the production of face and body creams. She developed this interest during her finishing year in Paris where she stayed with a doctor and his family. Later at the spa when working alongside the doctors she would listen attentively to their discussions about treatment creams for their patients. After the war my mother opened a beauty salon in Piestany to help my father conserve funds to continue running the house and farm. She was helped by some of the doctors she knew from the spa.

My mother was a wonderful cook and especially good at making Hungarian cakes. I still have her recipe book written by her entirely in Hungarian. She like my father, enjoyed entertaining. She spent a lot of time with her father assisting him wherever she could. She also loved working in the garden and I especially loved her telling me all about the plants she grew. My mother was an intelligent, kind woman who worked tirelessly for the good of others. I loved her dearly.



My mother at Banka farm



The next image is of my parents in Winterova ulica. The other female is Marietta, my fathers sister who lived in Nitrianska Blatnica.

World War 11

The years leading up to the war were quite concerning for us as a family. My father knew we were in danger. For instance, he had a grill cut into their bedroom window that could be opened from the inside and closed from the outside. He used it once and escaped the scrutiny of the Slovakian police, the Hlinka guard or the SS. He had to lay low for a few days before he was able to return to our home in Banka.

My parents employed Jewish people on the estate and a larger number at the Spa. As things got worse, I know that up to 70 Jewish people were hidden in the forest on our estate mainly at Nitrianska Blatnica. In 1944 we returned to our family seat at Sarfia because my father believed we should be in the family seat to be able to protect it. My mother's sister Maria Schulzova lived in a house next to the entrance to the castle. It belonged to my father's sister Marietta, who my father moved to Austria for her safety.

Maria's husband Pavel was in hiding because of his Jewish connections. Their daughter Agnes was hidden in a convent and their son Andreas who I was close to as a child, was living with the blacksmith in Radosina to keep him safe. One particular day that is etched in my mind, was because of the horror of it. My parents were away for the day, and I came out to play in the garden at the front of the castle. I looked up to see two SS soldiers with machine guns marching my aunty down the drive away from our home. I was so afraid, I ran and hid in the greenhouse under the shelving, I thought they would take me also. This was the last time we saw my aunty, Agnes and Andreas never saw her again. She was taken to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and died just as the Jews in the camp were liberated. She died of typhoid. During this awful period, my grandfather was taken to Terezin, I will talk more of this painful time when describing his life.



Me and Andreas



My mother and me in the clear near St. George's chapel at Sarfia (Na Pusti)

Later that year, my parents took me to the forest where we had a house next to St George's chapel. I was sitting outside reading a book when I heard a sharp whistle. I looked up and saw we were surrounded by SS troops who had machine guns and rifles with bayonets. They came from everywhere, I was terrified. They were searching for Jews. They searched the church, the forester's house and poked bayonets into the hay in the lofts. Fortunately, they found no one. One Jew that was living in the house disappeared very early every morning and didn't return until late in the night. He thankfully, was away from the house when they came. They questioned my father and mother and I remember my father having considerable difficulty explaining who we were. I was howling my eyes out throughout this terrifying time. The officer finally said "Let's leave them, he is not a Jew, he is who he claims to be, his German is too good." They abruptly marched away to the village where they rounded up over 20 Jewish people who were never heard of again. There were rumours that they also shot people from a nearby village.

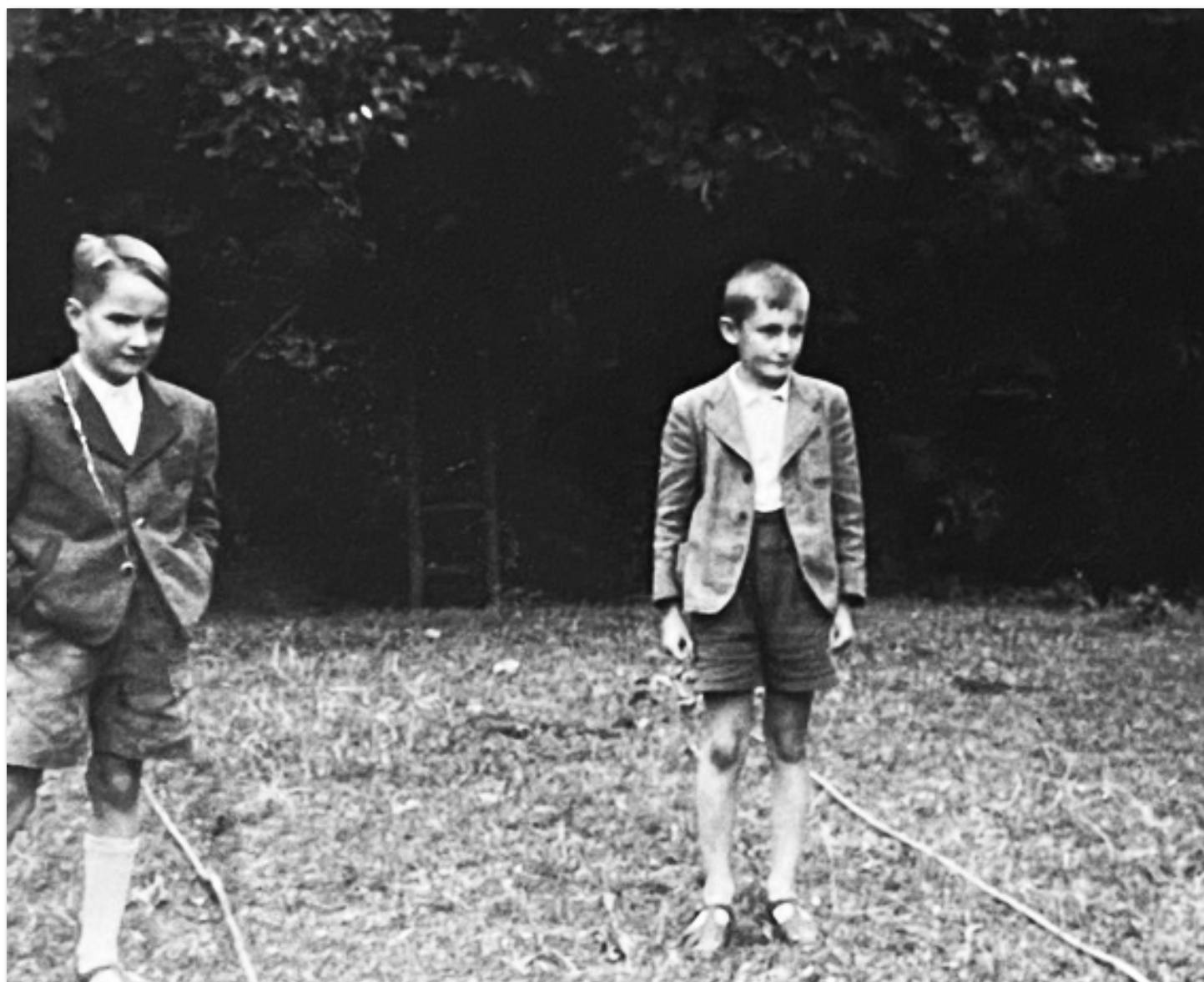
We had a hunting lodge at the other end of the forest. They burned it down to make sure no one could live in

it. My parents were deeply affected by these awful events and prevented me from going to school during our time at Sarfia. I used to play around with Janko Kolnik, Rudolf Funta, Jozko Mutt and of course Ivan Komlosi, the last two boys were with me in the gymnasium at Piestany.

In Spring 1945 my father took me to our lodge in the forest. We saw the war front go through below. They were shooting in all directions as they went. The Germans were retreating, the Russian troops were moving forward. I believe the Romanian troops who were also marching were part of the Russian force.

My mother was in Sarfia, she was in the castle. Someone from the village came to the lodge and told us it was safe for us to return. The Russian and Romanian troops came to our place later that day and took over some of our accommodation. The Russian commander took over my bedroom in the smaller house called the little castle (maly kastiel) in Sarfia. It was near the gate entrance to the castle. These troops treated us decently, though the commander shot one of his own. He told his troop they were not to go down into our wine cellar, this soldier did and came out with a bottle of wine in his hand. The commander shot him on the spot. This occurred outside the front of the castle. The following day, the Russians moved on and the Romanian soldiers remained for a while.

In this period, a commissioner was put in charge of the entire state at Sarfia. This included the forests the farms and the vineyards. The commissioner did not have a clue about farm management. My father worked out some sort of compromise with him – the animals had to be fed and cared for, so did the people and the work had to carry on without fail. The commissioner conceded that my father needed to carry on with aspects of running the estate to make sure it continued to function.



Me and my friend Ivan Komlosi

Life was becoming more and more uncertain and every day brought new concerns which increased our fear for our lives. One event that sticks in my mind was that the commissioner shot dead a man in the square because he was told that an improvised court found he was a German sympathiser. Dark days indeed.

A few weeks later we moved to Villa Riviera in Piestany, Banka was unavailable to us, troops were living at the house. While we lived at Riviera I returned to school in Piestany. Some months later we moved back to Banka. I found that my bedroom was taken over by the commissioner. I was given my parents' bedroom leaving them to turn a sitting room into their bedroom.

We still had a cook and helpers in the house, my parents appeared to be busier than ever. Because of the uncertainty of the situation, my mother opened a cosmetic salon in Zeleny strom. She soon had many clients on her books, both locally and from far afield. With the assistance of a Viennese doctor from the spa, she commenced making her own lotions and potions.

During this period, I was at the gymnasium and although I loved football, I could not match the older boys. I was the youngest in the school. I was a strong swimmer and belonged to the Piestansky plavecky club. I looked up to Laco Bacik who was a little older and a very strong swimmer. He swam like a fish. We played water polo together and often trained with well known polo players including Vadrna, Oravec, Strobl and Komadel just to name a few. Although I as a boy, was able to go to school and enjoy spending time at the pool with my friends, it was a different story for my father.

Emigration

Times were hard after 1945, our estate was confiscated by the state under the Benes Decrees. However, my father remained an optimist believing things would change, and we would have our property returned. As time moved on, we had to accept that the commissioner was controlling our estate. He was difficult to live with because he knew very little about farming which caused many problems for my father and the people working on the estate.

My father continued to hope life would normalise and that we could live on our estate in the future. He made many compromises in order to live and work under the commissioner's ruling. This was all so that we could continue to live in the place that he loved. Most hopes in this regard were shattered in 1948 when the communists took over the Czechoslovak government.

My parents travelled to Sarfia on a regular basis to make sure our home and estate were still in order. On one such occasion, when they reached the entrance to the Sarfia village, Mr. Mutt, who was the father of my friend Jozo, stopped them and told my parents "Turn around, your estate has been taken over by armed communist guards, I fear for your safety". My father's answer was as follows "You of all people, a known communist, why are you telling me this?" Mr. Mutt replied, "Yes I was a communist all my life, so was my father, but these men are communist in name only, I do not trust them, I fear for your life. At this point my father thanked him and together with my mother, they turned around and returned to Banka.

Later, my parents found out that some of their possessions in the castle and the "maly kasiel" were deemed to be personal property and were not part of the confiscation. Knowing this, my parents arranged for several trucks with armed drivers and helpers, including my mother, to go to Sarfia and collect our possessions. Incredibly, they were successful and returned to Banka without incident.

My parents were left with very few choices of where to go or what to do to remain safe. This was far from an ideal situation. They were hoping to find a way to remain in Banka yet knew their lives were at risk. A local communist who was speaking for the communists both in Banka and Sarfia told my father, "We locals have no problems with you here, but there are some people in Prague and Bratislava who want your blood. Leave if you can, we can no longer protect you". This was in 1948 after the communist coup. This was the final straw.

My parents knew we were in imminent danger, they had to find a way for us to leave. After all this happened my father was not well enough to march across the border at night. There were guards and we could well have

been shot. Neither was the 'legal' way an option because citizens could not leave the country. A small loophole appeared. Stateless families could leave and return to their homeland. In this period, the German nationality did not exist, my father was a German national and a CSR citizen. This meant if he 'lost' this citizenship we would be stateless and were told we could leave.

He found a way to 'lose' it and convinced the Italian Consulate in Bratislava that we wanted to move back to Italy given our family name was Leonhardi which was of Italian origin. He determined that this was possible. Of course, it was never my father's intention for us to live in Genoa in Italy, it was the only way we could get a visa to leave the country legally. We received visas for a period of three months. We had finally found a way to leave.

My father was told he had to put together a list of our possessions of what we wished to take with us. Someone decided on what we could take and what possessions we were barred from taking. My parents commenced packing, I still attended the gymnasium and played water polo and swam at the pool in a normal way. They wanted to keep things as normal as possible mainly for our safety. We did not want to attract any attention at this stage.

One of the items on the 'not allowed' list was a 24 setting gold plated cutlery service. I never saw it in use, I think my parents never liked it believing it was ostentatious. My father took it to Prague on a business trip and tried to sell it to give us funds for the escape trip he was planning for us. A jeweller was interested in it. The next moment, the police arrived and arrested him for trying to sell stolen goods. He was taken to one of the biggest prisons in Prague, the Pancras prison. They searched his hotel room but found nothing. Even so, it took over a month to convince the authorities he was selling his own property and had not contravened the law in any way. Without my mother's efforts to find him and get him out, he would have remained there for much longer.

During the time my father was in prison the visas expired. On his return, he managed to get a visa for 24 hours. This was three days after Christmas in 1949. We left as quietly as possible at night with just hand luggage. We needed to get to Zelany Strom to have the last meal with Opi my grandfather. This would have been a very painful time for my parents and grandfather. Later my mother told me it was a nerve racking time and it had contributed to my father becoming unwell. We were unable to say goodbye to others because it was important that we did not attract any attention to our leaving, so we left as quietly as possible.

We were taken to the train station in Piestany and caught the train to Bratislava and then changed trains to Vienna (Wien) It was particularly hair raising at the borders with the guards boarding the train and looking at us and my father's papers. My mother said later she found it hard to breathe!

Our train went to the Russian zone in Vienna which was even more frightening because if the Russians had detected any anomaly, they would have arrested my father and sent us back.

Vienna was divided into the four powers. We were able to move into the English zone of Vienna and could move around within limits. During our time in Vienna, I was unable to attend school because we were stateless. Even though I was born in Vienna, it didn't count. We stayed at a friend's apartment and were there for a year.

My parents were unable to work. My father had offers to manage farms in Austria, but Austria was under Russian occupation making it impossible for him to take up any offers. After a year in Vienna living in this way where my father was trying to find solutions for the future, moving to Germany was not an option, Canada or Australia were the only real possibilities. My father selected Australia because we had family friends, the Zokolocsy's from Horka in Slovakia, living in Tasmania.

Our journey from our home was long and arduous. I missed Banka and all that I knew that had been left behind. We flew to Munich where I had a small window to go skiing with a family friend. We stayed only long enough to organize a train journey to Genoa where we knew we would be able to board the SS Cyrenia that would take us on a long journey to Fremantle in Western Australia.

People have said we emigrated, I wish to set the records straight in honour of my father's efforts to keep us safe, he took many risks to save our lives and in doing so, was resigned to the fact that we needed to leave our beloved homeland behind. This was an incredibly sad time for us as a family. Not only were we leaving our homeland but our loving family, especially dearest Opi.

My Grandfather Ludvic Winter



Ludvic Winter was the 3rd child of Alexander and Henrieta (nee Kacserova) his younger brother Imrich who was born 8 years after Ludvic. When Ludvic was only 20, he asked return from Vienna where he was studying to help his father Alexander with the development of the spa. His entrepreneurial thinking made it possible him create an expansive vision for the spa and surrounds. Imrich was a vital part of the rich cultural development in the Spa and hotels. He set up the Piestany museum society which aided in the building of the museum, holding concerts, parties and theatre events. Recreation at the Spa and hotels was also initiated by Imrich. He was responsible for the development of a golf course and tennis courts. Even though I was a young boy, I recall spending time with my great Uncle with deep fondness.

As the second world war encroached upon our part of Europe, I overheard a conversation about a former spa official Vojtech Tuka. He had broken the trust my grandfather had in him. He was later to return and order that people listen to a speech he was to give from the balcony of the town hall. Earlier he had been released from Pankrac prison where he was held after being found guilty of treason.

My grandfather knew he had visited Hitler and remained mistrusting of him. It appeared that Hitler had sent him on a mission as a secret informer. He became the mouthpiece of Hitler and his German interests. My grandfather told my family Tuka declared his intention to remove the power of the Winter family. He determined their work would cease immediately. It soon became apparent that the Winter and Leonhardi families were targeted. My grandfather knew they intended to wipe both families. On one occasion, 16 members of the family including my father had their homes searched and were dragged into custody at the Palace of Justice and were interrogated. Imrich opposed them, with the result they beat him to the ground. He lay there bleeding. Opi told us 16 innocent family people had suffered. Imrich never recovered, he had a nervous breakdown during the interrogation and later died in a hospital in 1943. I remember attending his funeral. My grandfather was deeply affected by the loss of his brother.

Opi, wrote his memoirs stating the sordid details of the hardship he and the family experienced at the hands of the 3rd Reich. I find it so very difficult to describe my grandfather's life at the hands of those running Sered



*The lower left image is depicting the funeral of Imrich.
I am towards the back, the little 9 year old boy.*

music always reminds me of the time I spent with my Opi. I was immensely proud of him and would listen to the conversations between my parents when I could, about his work and achievements, and sadly of his concerns for our safety. (my parents would be talking in Hungarian and I did my best to follow their conversations!) I knew from listening that he had so many ideas that he wanted to realise. I understood that our farm and properties were likely to come under rulings that would remove our family from running it. He would visit us at times, though our visits to him were more frequent.

Banka was our property until Count Erdody took it over. Opi had to concede he had lost the control of Banka and the Spa initially to Count Erdody then to German ruling and finally the communist regime.

Opi was in fact a genius, indeed, not only was he a kind loving, forgiving man, he constantly came up with ideas and initiatives that would directly benefit the local people, the sick, children, babies and people with ailments from other countries. The river of oppression that at times, engulfed him, never changed his beliefs and determination to carry on the best way he knew. It was only in later years as a young man did my father expand on the hardships he went through in an effort to keep the spa functioning even though he had to give up the notion it would ever be returned to the family. How he suffered, yet never did he give up. I am beyond proud of my grandfather and have a very big space in my heart where he resides.

and Terezin where he was interned. It is unbearable to imagine his experiences as a 73 year old elderly man who was physically fragile and unwell. When he was finally released, his family surrounded him with love and care. He was so weak and ill. He described himself as a "rickety skeleton" Yet within weeks, he started working with new ideas. He came up with the idea of nutritional foods for babies and children when he realized there was a lack of specialized foods for children... and so the nourishing BB pudding! Opi ate it himself to provide himself with nourishing food. I can remember the pudding and relished eating it whenever I was allowed. I also loved the biscuits he created for the children and people recovering from illnesses.

As a young boy, I looked up to my grandfather who shared his wisdom with me. His mind was full of new ideas and new ventures yet he had some reticence about discussing the future. He also shared his passionate love of classical music. He especially loved Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture. He would play it in his office for me and ask me if I could hear the tanks being driven, the soldiers marching. And the guns exploding through the musical piece. He told me Napoleon was marching on Moscow, and then the Russian troops chased the French! This has stuck in my mind ever since. I cannot hear that piece of music without thinking of his words and the

Professional life

Studying in Australia proved difficult for me given I did not speak English. I completed my matriculation and commenced university studying geology and chemistry. My English created additional difficulties for me when studying. My parents were without an income and were unable to assist me with the cost of university. I was able to gain a position with a geophysical company who were searching for oil in the north of the state. I found further employment as an assistant geo physicist working in Europe for five years. My work took me to Germany, Sicily and Spain I returned to Australia in 1961 after the death of my father. I was unable to make it to his funeral he died before I was able to return. This had a huge impact on me as I was close to him. I found it so difficult to believe my rock, my anchor was no longer in my life.



*Elizabeth von Leonhardi's salon in London Court
in the centre of Perth in the 50's*



Me in the window of Leonhardi salon in the 70's

Returning to geo physical work or resuming my university studies proved too difficult given my wife had ongoing health issues. At this time, my mother had a large beauty salon in London Court in the centre of Perth city. I began helping her with the production of her creams and maintaining her electronic equipment. This led me to become very interested in her business. I took over the business after she died. It was a struggle at first, though the staff were excellent and kept the business going. I missed my mother and her considerable wisdom and skill. It was a sad time for me.

Gradually, I learned more about the actual treatments. I undertook various courses including courses in Vienna and Zurich to learn more about beauty therapy and cream production. With my background in chemistry and physics, I found the work as a beauty therapist and business owner of a beauty salon easy to transition into. I used my mother's recipes that she brought from Piestany and Vienna to make the creams which were highly sought after. Leonhardi Skin and Body Care was running from 1952 until I closed the salon 50 years later. I worked from home for a few years and to this day.



*Me in Bavaria on my return to Europe in the 70's
undertaking beauty therapy courses*



Agnes and her brother Andreas with me in Bratislava in the late 80 's

I continue to make creams for family and friends from the same recipes and a few that I concocted as time went along. I studied aromatherapy and lymphatic drainage which added to my repertoire. On occasions, I continue to provide a facial treatment for family members and very close friends. I enjoyed my work as a beauty therapist immensely. When making the creams I always felt close to my mother and to our roots in Banka Piestany. I still use some of her equipment that came over from Piestany.



Andreas and me in Bratislava in 1992



Andrea, Sue, me and Andreas in his home in Bratislava also in 1992

The present

My son Anthony lives in Perth with his Mother. Unfortunately, my marriage to Kathleen was unsuccessful. Some years later I met Sue and we subsequently married. Sue has three sons. Sue came to Australia from Wales with her first husband and their very young sons Jeremy, Russell and Adam. They are married and now we have five grandsons who are all doing well and make us very proud.

My health is generally quite good, I remain active and busy and considering my age I believe I am doing very well. I did have some health problems almost five years ago, but thankfully, I have recovered very well. Most of my time is spent with Sue, our family and friends. We love to go to coffee houses and relax over a coffee with friends. We enjoy walking and visiting the city to walk around and see how it is growing. We spend time with our close friends who both live in the same apartment complex. We live near the river so enjoy watching the ships enter and leave the port from our balcony. In the past 30 years, we have enjoyed a number of overseas trips to Europe and Wales. These trips meant so much to us and have provided us with wonderful memories.



My 87th birthday

To return to my homeland was especially poignant, I was so happy to meet up with family and share stories with each of them. Spending time with the daughter of Andreas and the granddaughter of Agnes was especially moving. We were also very blessed to meet Imrich's granddaughter in Paris. People made us feel so welcome, it was a privilege to be amongst people who knew of my mother and father. It was especially wonderful to be present when Opi was finally recognised for everything he accomplished throughout his lifetime.

My Slovakian is somewhat rusty though when I get an opportunity to talk with someone who speaks the language I soon pick up and get more confident in using Slovakian. I have a Slovakian book that I like to read that helps me remember words that I may have forgotten. Generally, I am more comfortable speaking in German though don't have many opportunities to speak German either.

When someone mentions Banka I get a very warm feeling and see a kaleidoscope of images. The familiar house, the beautiful gardens, the fruit trees laden with fruit. I 'see' our Tatra car and the horse drawn carriages. I can almost smell the stables and feel the heat of the blacksmith's fire as he banged on the anvil making horse shoes. Most of all, I remember the people on the farm and my family especially Opi. I recall my school friends and the boys that lived on the farm.

I can really understand why my parents loved the place and never wanted to leave. We were always accepted in the village and helped out where we could. If things hadn't become so frightening and risky, we would never have left. I believe it broke my father's heart. Thanks to the local people who warned us that our lives were in imminent danger, we were able to leave quickly and establish a new life far away in Australia. Yet Banka will always be my home and remain so in my heart.

I would dearly love to come home once again to see my home and the village. Finding the funds is the only obstacle. With God's blessing I will try to find a way to make it possible. Sharing my memories with you has taken me on a journey filled with a range of emotions, mostly good, but some, very painful to relive. If my memory has failed me in any way, I apologise. What I have set out to do, is to honour my grandfather and my parents and the wonderful people who took care of us and helped us along the way. I thank each of them from the bottom of my heart.

John von Leonhardi