

Quotes from My Extended Family

—Laura Smetana

This timeline shows how opinions vary among generations and illustrates how a person's age during two pivotal moments in Slovakia's history—the Soviet invasion in 1968 and Velvet Revolution in 1989—influences their beliefs.

Interviewees in this section have memories of brief democratic period and Gottwald

Born 1919 (age 49 during Soviet invasion in 1968; age 70 during Velvet Revolution in 1989)

“I am happy that we don't have Iron Curtain and that we can travel through the whole world. Finally we are free... communism did everything wrong. My family broke down because of communism, I was in jail, I lost everything three times. First they confiscated my company. Second they put me in jail. Third they broke my marriage. Destroying my family, that was the hardest because if I lost my company I knew how to work and I could gain again.”

Born 1922 (age 46 in 1968; age 67 in 1989)

“Right now we have a bad life, it was better to live in communism because right now if you are fifty years old you cannot find a job. The new government has to deliver what they promised to us...”

Born 1928 (age 39 in 1968; age 61 in 1989)

“I feel that democracy has changed. Those who have power: people in the government and leaders of companies who have millions. Yes it is a lot better for them, but for the people like me, the average retired person who has the minimum income, it is getting worse.”

Interviewees in this section have no memories of brief democratic period and Gottwald

Born 1945 (age 22 in 1968; age 44 in 1989)

“The Iron Curtain was that we couldn't travel behind anyplace.... [my understanding came from] the newspaper, from the TV and from the school talking to the classmates...we were mad that we couldn't travel anyplace else. We were mad. We were mad at the system, at the communist system that we couldn't travel anyplace. We were stuck here like in a cage.”

Born 1946 (age 21 in 1968; age 43 in 1989)

“Yes, my understanding [of the Iron Curtain] changed positively and negatively. Before we could only compare with the Soviet Union and now we can compare with the Western part of the world. And even if not everything is positive from the West, at least we can compare it.”

Born 1948 (age 20 in 1968; age 41 in 1989)

“[After the 1968 Soviet invasion] there was panic in the stores, people were buying everything in the stores: toilet paper, salt, sugar, everything. When the army came to the town of Myjava we came out from our jobs. Almost everybody could speak Russian and we started talking to the Russian soldiers, ‘Why did you come here, what happened?’ They told us that there was a contra revolution here and that they came over here to quiet it down. We told them that we wanted to show them that there was no contra revolution over here.”

Born 1948 (age 20 in 1968; age 41 in 1989)

“What I miss most [from the communist period] is medical care and our pension doesn’t reflect the changes in the medical field. We have to pay a lot of money for medicine and drugs. Our pension, it doesn’t agree with the drastic climate of expenditures in medical care.”

Born 1950 (age 18 in 1968; age 39 in 1989)

“It is very hard to say [how long it will take before the transition period to democracy is over]. Lots of people are having a better time now than during socialism and lots of people are worse now than they had been.”

Born 1950 (age 18 in 1968; age 39 in 1989)

“[Looking back before the changes that occurred in 1989] I didn’t even trust or believe that the [company that I worked for] would fall down. I couldn’t even imagine; for my generation I couldn’t even think it could be the other way. The capitalistic society and free market is not the best system for people and that is my opinion. Sometime there is going to be a better system than now.”

Born 1953 (age 15 in 1968; age 36 in 1989)

“Before it was life without worries. During communism it wasn’t bad. Communists only had two mistakes: they wouldn’t give you freedom of religion and they wouldn’t let people travel. Now people can go out but they don’t have money for traveling out.”

Born 1954 (age 14 in 1968; age 35 in 1989)

“I was 14 years old the day 21st of August came and the Russians invaded. I had never seen soldiers in that large amount and I had never seen any war, so I couldn’t understand... I was not interested in politics; I was interested in sports... When I came from London, two months after the invasion, then I had a better understanding of what was going on since I had seen the difference. I couldn’t buy the chewing gum here but in England I could.”

Born 1955 (age 13 in 1968; age 34 in 1989)

“After the Velvet Revolution we were thinking [that democracy] was possible, we were looking for change. Before everybody was working and everybody had a little bit but nobody could get ahead because everybody was almost equal. But now we are free so we can work and get better. All the time there was stereotyping so people couldn’t show what was in them. They couldn’t make progress because they didn’t have the opportunity.”

Born 1956 (age 12/13 in 1968; age 33 in 1989)

“I was thirteen-years-old...Grandma started crying in the early morning. She said that the Russians took over... There were colonies of tanks and military equipment. Tons of them. People were crying. People were swearing. People started throwing stones. The [Soviets] started shooting at the air. Then what happened is that a mass of people put barricades on the road. They were sending the colonies of military transports eastward which was the way to Moscow, back to their old country. For a while that was successful but then they found out that it was the wrong way.”

Born 1961 (age 7 in 1968; age 28 in 1989)

“When I was in middle school we were supposed to go on a trip to East Germany. My class teacher told me I couldn’t go because I am not trustworthy because I have an uncle in America. Instead of me some other girl went...I was sad but I couldn’t do anything.”

Interviewees in this section have no memories of the Soviet invasion

Born 1961 (age 7 in 1968; age 28 in 1989)

“My wife’s godmother had beautiful calendars of the Swiss Alps and from these pictures I saw how beautiful the villages were over there in Switzerland. So I thought that the West could bring some order...I thought how nice it is over there.... The people from the West could freely travel the whole world... [In the present day] my view on the West has changed because the questions about democracy are a little different than what they used to be. It’s not so idle like it was before when I saw the pictures of the calendar, since then I had a chance to travel so it is not so idle as when I was in Czechoslovakia behind the Iron Curtain.”

Born 1965 (age 3 in 1968; age 24 in 1989)

“[Looking back to 1989] I believed that the changes would come. When the changes came I believed that the change was going to come in this big euphoria and I believed that we were even going to catch up with America and the rest of the world. Of course it turned out that it is not going to be so easy.”

Born 1965 (age 3 in 1968; 24 in 1989)

“[After the fall of communism] they opened the border, the Iron Curtain came down, everybody fled to Austria...or Germany or wherever, everybody was going to the West right away... I went to Vienna, Austria, with my friend...but you have to change the Czechoslovakian money and because of the currency exchange you cannot buy that much, you are more like window-shopping... We took a car and we drove over there, I spent one day over there and I came back home. That was it.”

Born 1970 (n/a 1968; age 19 in 1989)

“For us as young people at this time, [before the fall of communism] if we had a chance to visit the West and my other friends didn’t have that chance, we felt superior. We knew something more and we were superior to other friends who couldn’t visit the West.”

Born 1970 (n/a 1968; age 19 in 1989)

“Almost everybody knew that [the media under communism] showed what they were allowed to or what they had to. And we saw it when [the democratic movement] started, especially because we were a part of the movement and then you see in the nightly news they say, “Oh nothing is going on in Bratislava, everything is so fine.” And you say “*Ahha!*? Have you been there?” [laughs] so that was the story. That is why if you got some phone calls from home, they were like, [whispers] “Hey what are you doing there?”

Born 1979 (n/a 1968; age 10 in 1989)

“I didn’t remember [communism] so much because I was really young...I was a small child so it was not a bad time for me. I think that I had everything that I was asking for, so I don’t

remember something bad but I know a lot of stuff about this and I don't like it so much and also I am really happy that the time changed and right now I can travel where I want because I love it! So I can do what I want. ... [My parents] don't understand at all what I am thinking about. [Laughs] They don't understand my life. Not at all. Because it is like a different country, I mean my parents they grew up somewhere totally different, in the different system... Usually we, [my sister and I] talk together because usually all the people from the age of my parents, they don't understand what I am talking about. They are scared from everything, so if I said 'I will do this,' they say 'no, no! Don't, don't do this.' They are scared that I will change something in my life. But it is coming from the communism because they never tried different, they all the time were in the same way. All the time! And they never tried something different so it is kind of hard to talk to them about changes or something because they are scared from the changes."

Born 1982 (n/a 1968; age 7 in 1989)

"In 1989 I was seven-years-old... children didn't want to wear red because it was the color of the communism. And it was so funny... I had a red jacket but it was just the color red because I was a child... and everybody was laughing at me because it was the color of communism. And I was like 'I like this color!' [Laughs]... And then I didn't wear that color for maybe one year."

Born 1984 (n/a 1968; age 5 in 1989)

"[My understanding of the Iron Curtain came] usually from school and maybe from talking with my relatives and friends, but [I always heard] different opinions and when you didn't live in that time you don't know what [opinion] to choose from... [In school] they did stuff mostly from the negative point of view because that is what they needed us to know, but I don't think it was as bad as they used to teach us."

Interviewees in this section have no memories of communism

Born 1987 (n/a 1968; age 2 in 1989)

"I have heard about it [the Iron Curtain] and I have learned about it but unfortunately I don't know too much about politics and I have forgotten what it was."

Born 1988 (n/a 1968; age 1 in 1989)

"[Democracy] means that I can say everything I want, I can do everything... We have more opportunities [than my parent's generation] and a better life maybe."