

The Holocaust: A Message for the Present

“The Holocaust didn’t begin with loading the Jews onto the trains. It began the moment when one Jew was slapped in the face with impunity, because it only escalated after that. What we describe as the Holocaust was only the finale. The lesson from this is that we must fight against the first slap. That’s where we should start. . . ” – Alexander Bachner

I will pick up on his words. The Holocaust was the trauma of the 20th century in Europe (and Slovakia). Not only was it a tragedy for the victims but for all involved. I believe that in today’s chaotic era of intolerance and hatred, when people kill each other because of a different nationality, ethnicity, religion or mere difference of opinion, learning about the causes and consequences of the Holocaust has a new urgency.

The most interesting aspect of the aftermath of the Holocaust is that in Austria the existence of the Holocaust was virtually unknown until the mid-1970s. It is stunning given the fact that Austria and many of its citizens played a prominent role in the Holocaust. Austria simply wasn’t prepared to confront the reality of the Holocaust, especially its involvement in it. In comparison to Germany where military tribunals indicted concentration camp guards, Austria, until 1949, allowed many former NSDAP members to be accepted into public and political offices, which furthered Holocaust denial. In Austria the whole period of 1938-1945 “sank underground”. It was not mentioned in schools, in universities, on TV or in the parliament.

It took 40 years until the attitude of the highest-ranking Austrian political representatives changed which also meant changing the Austrian people, who began to reluctantly accept the responsibility for the events connected to the deportation and mass murder of the Jews.

One key figure instrumental in breaking the silence about Austria’s involvement in the Holocaust was Simon Wiesenthal. Because of his Jewish origin, he was pursued by the Nazis and survived imprisonment in several German concentration camps. After the war, he devoted his life to hunting down Nazi criminals and Holocaust perpetrators. As he once expressed: *“When the Germans came to Galicia for the first time, half of the population were Jews: one hundred and fifty thousand Jews. When the Germans left, only five thousand remained alive... I said to myself many times that everything in our lives is worth living for, that’s why the fact that I survived had worth. And mine was that while I’m alive, I must represent those who*

didn't survive.” That’s how he became the advocate of the 6 million Jewish victims of Nazism and helped to catch more than a thousand war criminals.

You’re probably wondering why I mentioned Austria when I am Slovak. First, one should realize that we can’t look at the Holocaust as an isolated occurrence. These events are not limited by borders of individual countries. The Holocaust is a global issue that still affects the present! The second reason is the fact it took Austria, a highly developed country, such a long time to recognize such a well-documented atrocity as the Holocaust. The Holocaust was the only case when war was declared on the grounds of race and not against a neighboring nation or state, or for economic, strategic or political reasons. Why? It was a planned radical revolution – an uprising against everything that had existed until that time.

Slovakia, which at the time was deeply influenced by the Soviet Union, wasn’t in much better shape. But even more bewildering is that today, more than 70 years after these events, in a time when information is so easily accessible with technology, internet and computers, when history breathes down on us from every corner and from every movie, many Slovaks still have the same attitude of denial that Austria did in the “long fifties,” as we usually call these years.

Let’s take a look together at the latest polls of the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights. A shocking 28% of respondents with basic education and 10% with college education do not want a Jew as a neighbor. These numbers are unmistakable proof that antisemitism is, alas, still strong in Slovakia.

And so, a question comes up which we should all think about. Did history teach us anything? People rarely learn from history and the history of the Nazi regime is no exception. In school, they teach us about generals, politicians and philosophers, but we do not learn about the dark side of history – mass murderers, agonies, suffering which screams at us throughout history. We still can’t comprehend that we will never be able to push back at our inclination for mutual destruction if we don’t talk about it. Let us realize one sad reality – human beings are the only creatures on Earth who are able to destroy themselves.

And so, because there is so little time devoted to teaching about the Holocaust and in some schools it is only a dead memory which comes to life in one history lesson a year, the young people don’t understand this problem and can’t look at the events connected with the genocide of the Jews with good judgment. This younger generation allowed a political party into the Slovak parliament in the last elections, whose ideas and opinions closely resemble those of the former leaders of the Slovak State because of inadequate information and

misunderstanding. Yet it is important to realize that in our first state there was a non-democratic regime in place and Slovakia was a “vessel” of Nazi Germany.

It can't be denied that seventy years have passed. Seventy long years from which the survivors' memories remain. But the Holocaust is not a closed historic chapter. Researching this tragedy is important because we face similar threats today, increased ethnic tension and radicalization in the political scene. It's important to call attention to the phenomenon of racial and ethnic hatred through educational activities to teach upcoming generations. Even today, there are people who are inspired by this time period and trying to bring it back.

If we want to understand why the Second World War and the genocide of the Jews occurred, we have to ask how it was possible that Adolf Hitler gained such huge support. Let's go back in time and take a short look at the development of these events in Germany. In the 1928 elections, the NSDAP gained 12 seats, in 1930, 107 seats and in 1933, 288 seats, 34% of all the members of the Reichstag. Can you see a parallel with the present? What caused such a rapid ascent? The same strategies these parties use today!

We remember the Weimar Republic, ruled by chaos, the high war reparations, and the Great Depression. It was in this state of affairs that Hitler with his demagogy, would rise to power in Germany, saying that he would give people jobs and get things in order. It's the same principle that is being used now – put a country in order, because it is in disorder. One should add that the other parties could have intervened but unfortunately the social democrats and the communists couldn't agree. Consequently, Hitler got rid of his political opponents and gained more power by creating the SS. I believe this is why some people are subconsciously afraid of train patrols and home defense plans from those who want to protect our borders. They are afraid the country could be on the same path as Nazi Germany.

I personally identify with the government's opinion that it is necessary to increase students' awareness. I support all activities aimed at eliminating extremism, racism, antisemitism and hate, including a mandatory visit to Auschwitz. We must not forget the fact that Slovakia had a black past in this sense, in the form of collection camps (where Jews were gathered to be transported to concentration camps) and Jewish labor camps, for example the camp in Sered. I am convinced that increasing awareness of this subject can influence young people's thinking. I hope the demand for educational activities will grow and prevent the spread of extremism in Slovakia, which is dangerous not only for society but also for individuals.

The question arises - how is it possible that far-right extremism or modern-day fascism was born in a place which was the center of anti-fascist resistance and has support even in

villages previously burnt down by the fascists? I think the main problem is that a majority of young people don't identify themselves with the happenings 70 years ago, with a political party that has now reached the parliament. The young tend to say that it isn't true, that he is just a man who wants to bring order. Wrong! That's the basic element of fascist ideology – to make order. And to keep making it indefinitely. It is a constant struggle - a struggle against everything!

If we want to prevent the same progression of events, to which we slowly but surely steer, we must change our thinking. Particularly, we have to start talking about the events connected to the Holocaust and the genocide of the Jews again. We can't stay silent and pretend that nothing happened or think history will not influence the present. In the spirit of Erich Kästner's thought: *"The past must break the silence and we must listen. Until then neither she nor we find peace,"* I allow myself to claim that the events of World War II connected with the genocide of the Jews should become a warning to us that something similar could happen again.

One who is hurt tries to get rid of the memory, not renew the pain, the one who did the hurting, pushes the memory as deep as possible to try to free himself from it and to weaken the regret. No one can put himself in the place of those who suffered so much. These people suffered because of their nationality and religion, but they did nothing wrong, they didn't hurt anyone. The words of the Austrian philosopher Jean Améry are not lost on us: *"He who was struck by suffering can no longer feel at home in the world, the horror of life's denial never goes away. Trust in humanity that was disturbed by the first slap and then destroyed by torture, never comes back."* I have to say again, with sadness, the atrocity can't be erased, it endures in time... Let's find a pinch of courage within ourselves! Let us not be cowards and try to look straight in the eyes of the truth. It's not possible to deny that these events were tragic, the fate of the Jews more than sad... But if we look at these dark moments objectively, we find that it's not possible to forget them. Only those who suffered can forgive. Our assignment is not to forget.

We should all take to heart the words of Simon Wiesenthal: *"When I die and come to Heaven, I will meet the Holocaust victims there. They will tell me what they did while they were alive. And when they ask me what I did in the world, I will answer: "I have never forgotten you."*

As we enter a new era, a critical one for future generations, we should create a future from this past because as we move farther away from these events and from the generation for which the events were a personal reality, the Holocaust becomes just a chapter of the World

War II period. We should keep in mind that the Holocaust deniers won't disappear with the information revolution. Quite the contrary, their effort to erase and deny history will be even simpler. We have to nourish the memory of the victims and events because the memory of history is eternal. Because there is no escape from memories. And that's how it should be. Never forget – Auschwitz, city of millions dead, deserves it.

The desire to for truth in history, with its bright and dark sides, should be the main pillar of our thinking. People must not be careless when it comes to expressions of neonazism, intolerance, extremism and antisemitism in Slovakia and the world. It is vital to realize how the past influences our present and what we have to do, if we don't want to gamble with our future. In history we look for answers for the present. We can choose to learn from it so we don't have to repeat the same mistakes or we can make them over and over again. It's up to us...

In conclusion, I will borrow the words of Miroslav Ivanov and hope that we remember them well and follow them throughout our lives: *“We don't have to love the past, it is sufficient to understand it and not to forget that it ends in the future.”*