

The Holocaust message for the present

Do you have an uneasy conscience when you do something bad? I sometimes have a guilty conscience as well. Remembering the past, shivers go down my spine. I think about how some people apparently didn't know the word conscience and how one man's aversion toward Jews resulted in huge consequences.

Who are the Jews? As we know from the past, the Jews weren't difficult to recognize. They wore a kippah on their heads to show humility before God. They had large beards as a symbol of wisdom. They were typically very pious and identified strongly with their faith. From 1810 to 1818 they began building first synagogues. There are three synagogues in Bardejov. I have personally visited one of them. Their culture was very interesting to me. They were one of the few religions that paid for their place of worship. There were also myths that were spread about them. One false myth was that they were usurers. They were actually highly educated people who took particular care that their children were well educated. They had a grammar school called cheder and high school called yeshiva.

The Jews were very sociable and founded various societies, like athletic or girls clubs. Jews were in Bardejov as early as the year 1247. Later, there was a plague which killed approximately half of the population. At first, the Jews resided in villages like Zlaté, Snakov, and Rokytov. From 1790 onwards, they started arriving in Bardejov as well, where they started trading and doing business. So far, I have never come across a situation in which a Jewish person has harmed someone. Prior to 1938, Bardejov was one of only a few towns that tolerated several religions. With the ascent of the Slovak State in 1939 came anti-Jewish organizations. The Hlinka Guard was founded and their guardsmen were very cruel toward the Jews. It is said that they were worse than the Germans. Why did this change happen so suddenly? The year the Hlinka Guard was formed, brought with it the first deportation and pillaging of Jewish homes in Slovakia. When I found out about it, I wasn't proud of my country. The Nuremberg "racial laws" stripped the Jews of their civil rights, such as forbidding marriage. Many senseless bans took effect, including public areas like parks. They were also marked with a yellow stripe and later with a yellow star. When the Germans

conquered Poland in the fall of 1939, they gained power over Polish Jews. In July 1941, Hitler approved the “final solution” to the Jewish question. Concentration death camps were built in Poland, like Auschwitz. The goal was to create a “clean race”. Anyone who didn’t fit Hitler’s vision was to be executed: people of African descent, Romani people and especially Jews. They were to be shot or sentenced to death by gas chamber. They even did medical experiments on Jews, for example tests on twins, women’s sterilization, among others.

Try to imagine that you are in their place and what these people must have gone through. We can’t even guess how many important educated people who could have changed the world were condemned to death. What if someone from your extended family was Jewish? Many Jews from Bardejov who survived Hitler’s actions live today in the USA, Israel and in Europe.

I also have to remark that despite the existence of so many depraved and evil people, there were others who helped the Jews escape or hid them in their houses. Some of these righteous people were from Bardejov: A. Bomba – a simple man who worked as a policeman and still sheltered Jews; V. Kyjovský – a common peasant who didn’t agree with what had been happening and, even though he was interrogated by the Gestapo, kept helping Jews; J. Kiseľ – a postman, informed the Jews about the impending plans; Š. Tarcalahelped by hiding Jews; A. Koperniechova – prevented the Germans, the guardsmen, and the Russians from entering the synagogue (only her daughter is alive today); and A. Židišín - a Greek Catholic priest from Rešov, saved several Jews and was turned in because of it. F. Gábor, a shopkeeper, also helped and took care of a Jewish family who stormed into his house to save themselves. Although there were these good people, there were too few in comparison to all the evil people.

Why did we allow this in the past? Why did we let so many innocent people die? Why didn’t anyone do something for them and oppose Hitler? Were we really that corrupt? It was, above all, a violation of basic human rights. If we carry the past over to the present we find many forms of racism here. In the second half of the 20th century people arrived at the conclusion that something like the Second World War should never happen again. However, the current progress of events in central Europe may raise concerns that a similar disaster could happen. This can be attributed to two basic ideologies from this period – racism and nationalism.

In Slovakia, the Slovak-Hungarian dispute and the Romani people have struggled with these issues for some time. During the Holocaust, the Jews were considered strangers although they had lived on our territory for 200 years. Now we see this with other refugees running away from Syria and Afghanistan. We should help them, first and foremost, because they are people who are in great need. The majority of those in need in Slovakia are the Roma. Hardly anybody realizes that their poverty is the result of segregation and corruption. It is possible to suspect that racial cleansing in Slovakia could become a reality once again. There's no doubt it will if people can't learn to tolerate their lifestyle. Most of us have a problem with the Roma minority. We call them "gypsies" and we try to keep them on the edge of society. Their crimes typically involve looking for food. You yourself have probably seen this. Open discrimination is not common anymore but subtler versions still exist. Searching on the internet, you'll find them listed in categories like "subhuman," which leads to further discrimination. As we know, members of the Roma community are only rarely represented in the civil service, the police or the armed forces. Are you surprised? If you asked the general public if they would hire a Roma person for a serious job, I think nearly everyone would say no. Street names, signs and inscriptions ignore Roma dialects. Civil servants and other people don't even try to speak the languages of the minorities, not even in regions where they have a significant presence. We can also come across various political parties and organizations that are "trying" to solve the Roma question. More and more young people become influenced by bad attitudes. For example in Poland, the majority of young voters supported a party whose agenda protests against liberal elites and nationalism. Of course, it is needless to say that here as well young people supported a party with similar characteristics. People are no longer interested in Roma integration but in the question of how to get rid of them. All of this tension worsens the situation.

The modern-day racism appeals to differences in culture. The latest issues are the refugees who seek safety for their families. The reason for their emigration is the war that rages on their territory. After arriving on our territory, questions began to surface: "Should we be afraid of them? Are they a threat or a contribution?" Regardless of the reasons for emigration, we are obliged to uphold human rights foreign policy. It's impossible to think that we wouldn't help these people. Despite that, people don't want them on their territory. These are people in extreme situations and it is inappropriate to discuss whether they deserve the

help. The Slovak refugee policy is very strict in comparison to other European countries. But if such a situation ensued on our territory, we would hope other countries would welcome us with open arms. Isn't it ridiculous to think we should not help to others but everybody should help us? Our attitudes are to some extent influenced by fear of the unknown and xenophobia. According to a poll, 70% of Slovak citizens are against accepting refugees. This refusal is not an opinion, but an egotistical escape from responsibility for humanity and a community who needs our help.

We don't realize we are hurtling toward the same machinery that was here before. It is regrettable and condemnable if the basic human rights and freedoms of people who are fleeing persecution in their home countries are violated like that. I think that a free country is one that can provide protection to people who are not its citizens as well. Who would have thought that a small picturesque country was so deeply immersed in racism? This is unfortunately happening in all of Europe. It results from the general tendency to categorize people into groups "just like us" and "the others". Alas, the prejudice is deeply rooted in us. These are but a few things that can be compared with the past. Today, there are still people who point out differences, condemn other races and religions. It was this way in the past and it's the same way today. It is sad that we call ourselves a Christian state, but when it is needed to accept someone new, everybody washes their hands of the responsibility. Doesn't faith teach us the opposite? But there are people who wanted to help and didn't hesitate to join in. The Pope himself prayed for those who didn't want to help the refugees and closed their doors in front of them. He also joined the Europe-wide discussion. So where's the problem?

The root of the problem of these questions lies in the fact that people are not people anymore. We divide ourselves as good and evil, white and black. Where is humanity and tolerance? Do we know the word tolerance nowadays? This word means to be patient and merciful, it allows to give everyone freedom of speech to express his attitudes and opinions. A tolerant man should not only see his own benefit but the benefit of others and respect not only his own rights but the rights of others as well. Where did all of this disappear? Let's try to give others a chance. Let's lower the social and political isolation and improve their living conditions.

Let's point out that it's cowardly to be racist and let's try to behave as equals. Let's fight against this by the means of education, tolerance, and the integration and empowerment

of other ethnicities. With this attitude we just might change the world and point out the senselessness that could have been prevented in the past. Let's show that we can learn from the mistakes we made and we will strive to correct them. Nobody, I hope, is able to imagine that something similar could happen in this time.

Let us remember what was. Let's honor the memory of the departed but let's not repeat what shouldn't be repeated. That's why the Remembrance Day should serve as a memory and remembrance of the Holocaust victims. Too many people forget and don't want to remind themselves what happened in the past. Why? Indeed, every one of us goes to the cemetery and lights a candle for our relatives who passed away. Maybe someone who perished during the Holocaust is in your family tree. And if not, don't they still deserve it? Recently, a new Holocaust museum was established in Sered. It honors the people who suffered from thoughtless acts in the past. I personally liked the idea of building a memorial in Bardejov. It's more than just words. It triggered my interest so much I wanted to learn more about the Holocaust. When I walk around the memorial, I always think – how was it back then? Of course, I talk to my schoolmates and my family about this new knowledge. It matters that we don't forget. Why? This memorial should, above all, be a warning so that we never commit such acts ever again. It should be a message for the present, because every man has a right to live regardless of his race or religion.

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