

Jakub Copak- June 2015 FIRST PRIZE

The tragedy of our Jewish neighbours – to forget or remember?

The issue of the Holocaust is a trauma of European and thus of Slovak history of the 20th century. It is, however, important to realize that the Holocaust wasn't only a tragedy for the victims but a tragedy for all its participants. I am convinced that in today's hectic times of intolerance and hate, when people murder each other just because of their nationality, ancestry or religion – finding out the cause, progression and consequences of the Holocaust is especially urgent.

This year on June 2, we remember the first anniversary of the opening of the Holocaust Memorial in Bardejov. The memorial depicts 3,292 names of Jews who were deported from Bardejov and the surrounding area. It may seem that the 70 years that have passed since the end of this bloody conflict, the end of World War II, have been long enough to forget these events. But can you ever forget? They say time heals all wounds, but I believe the scars remain forever. These scars will become messages for future generations, reminders not to allow genocide on such a massive scale ever again. These people did nothing wrong, they were persecuted just for being Jewish. They left behind empty houses, empty streets and scattered memories

The first reports of the Nazi extermination camps emerged in 1942. The reports were vague, but it became evident that there were mass killings going on, carried out with unprecedented cruelty and supported by precise government orders. Members of the SS knew that what was going on behind the walls of concentration camps was so horrible that the stories told by the camp returnees would be hard to believe. On the other hand, the concentration camps were dangerous to Germany as they concealed secrets of the suffering of millions of Jews of biblical proportions. Despite their effort to cover up everything, facts were revealed over time that changed people's perception.

The truth about concentration camps can be reconstructed from the survivors' memories. There are approximately 180,000 of them still alive. Regardless of the regret or outrage these memories incite, they should be accepted, not condemned. Despite the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cambodian genocide, and many other cruel and meaningless wars which we saw before and after, the Nazi system of concentration camps remains unique in its scale and character. Never before in any time or place were we witnesses to such an unexpected event –

industrial facilities of death – never before were so many lives put out in such a short time. In this moment, a question arises which all of us should think about. What can any of us do to retain our humanity in this world full of threats? I believe that the Holocaust was the only case when war was declared because of racial reasons and not against a neighbouring nation or state, or for economic, strategic or political reasons. Why? I think one thing should be clear to us; it was a planned radical revolution – an uprising against everything that existed until that point.

How could this happen? How could such cultured people living in the middle of Europe, creators of one of the greatest civilizations, accept such an ideology? The core strategy of the Holocaust was destroying everyone who was considered different. It was a plan to completely annihilate the Jewish population. However, the most terrible discovery is that the Nazis were not inhuman. They were tragically common people. Many people ask how the SS officers were different from the rest of us. They were from the same world we live in, they were human beings, aside from some monstrous exceptions, but they were brought up differently. They were brought up in the spirit of Hitler's ideas and orders. Some regretted it, and a few cautiously helped the prisoners or chose to commit suicide so that they wouldn't have to witness any more suffering. Most of the people in the world are not Germans, but many have an inclination to think, that everything that happened back then can never happen again and that it could have only happened in Germany. Wrong! That's reverse racism. . .

The names of all who are bound together by the tragic fate of deportation hide a unique story, but only a few of the stories have been told. Although many of us never felt the bitter taste of suffering and horror, we should at least remember those who experienced these moments first-hand by lighting a candle at the Memorial. Let's be human enough not to forget these tragic stories of people who were no different from the rest of us. They just had bad luck by being Jewish. . .

When one is hurt, he tries to get rid of the memories, not to renew his pain, when one has caused harm, he pushes the memory as deep as possible, to free himself and weaken his remorse. No one can put himself in the shoes of those who had to suffer so much. These people suffered for having a different nationality and religion, but they did nothing wrong, they didn't hurt anyone. The words of the Austrian philosopher Jean Amery are moving: *“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 say again with sadness that the injustice cannot be erased, it goes on. . . Let’s find a bit of courage within ourselves! Let us not be cowards, let’s try to look the truth in the eyes. It can’t be denied that these events were tragic, the fate of the Jews was more than sad. . . But if we look at these dark moments objectively we find out that they simply cannot be forgotten.

The Holocaust took place approximately 75 years ago. One could assume that the last word about this subject has been already spoken and that interest in this specific genocide is diminishing, but one would be wrong. A week doesn’t go by in which someone doesn’t comment on it and a film or a book isn’t published on the subject. It cannot be understood in writing, there are words missing that would enable us to express what a man saw and experienced. Human minds cannot encompass the whole evil that a person is capable of, a person worse than an animal. It is again essential to ask why. I think that the answer which I will offer now is not better than any other, but I would like to present it anyway. For the first time in human history, people descending from three or four generations, in this case of Jewish origin, were sentenced to death just because of the way they were born. This fact only, the birth itself was the crime and it was to be avenged by execution. This had never happened before.

I will now build on the pious writing on the Holocaust Memorial: *“Every number has a name, every name has a story. . . ”* and I hope we’ll succeed to tell as many stories as possible, stories of people who met with a tragic fate in concentration camps, and that the public hears the stories these names hide. Behind every name there’s a unique story. . . a story which should be told out of respect for their lives.

In the spirit of the quote: *“He who doesn’t know his past is doomed to repeat it”* I dare to claim that the events of World War II coupled with the Jewish genocide should become a warning to us that something similar could repeat itself. A question arises: Did history teach us anything? People rarely learn from history and the history of Nazism is not an exception. In school they teach us about generals, politicians and philosophers but they tend to avoid the darker sides of history – mass murderers, agonies, suffering which scream into our faces from history. We still cannot understand that we will never be able to push back the tendencies of mutual destruction if we don’t talk about them. Let’s realize one sad fact – humans are the only species on Earth capable of destroying themselves. Although these events are more than sorrowful, it doesn’t mean we should forget about them. I think it’s our duty to keep them alive out of respect to those who experienced them first-hand, just because they were Jews. . .

We should also keep in mind that the Holocaust deniers will not disappear with the advancing information revolution, the internet and other technology. On the contrary, their effort to erase and deny history will be even simpler. That's why we are here, common people who are no different from each other but have a bit of common sense to fight the forgetting of the past. We must keep the memories alive and inform new generations to prevent a similar progression of events. The memory of history is eternal. There is no escape from memories. And that's the way it should be. Never forget Auschwitz – those who died there deserve at least that.