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## **Jewish monuments in Bardejov**

Exploring history is wonderful because it is her that is the best teacher of life. Learning more about history of one's own family is even a better feeling. This emotion is often experienced by the descendants of Bardejov Jewish community because many precious artefacts were found during renovation and collection of historical information.

For a Jew, uncovering the secrets of his family is without any doubt a wonderful event. In my opinion, all the cities with known past existence of Jewish communities should start one extensive, and hopefully definitive, search for ancestors, followed by an active effort for preservation of Jewish heritage.

Every individual can be part of a bigger picture, just like every group of hardworking, unwordly people with good and big hearts. At the restoration of a historical monument, every willing hand counts. Numerous volunteers are part of something bigger already today by helping with the search for Jews footprints in Bardejov. They got tangled in the knots of fates and merged with them to the point that there is no way back until they unravel them all. In many cases we may observe a situation when people involved in this circle do not wish to get out of it. They focus on awareness and forbidding for the fates of Jews to be forgotten. Also in Bardejov, there are a few individuals who, with help of various Jewish and non-Jewish institutions, started to renovate these historical monuments. I personally noticed a positive approach of schools towards the Jewish subject. Due to that, students may learn more about culture, history, traditions and life of this extensive community during their studies. These steps may lead to better Slovakia, or even a better world. If we manage to develop racial and religious tolerance already in children, the seed of multiculturalism in society, it might prevent from repeating the history or more likely the human stupidity.

When we turn our hearts to history, we start exploring and new knowledge will definitely break something in us. We come to understand the context and that is the most

important factor in an intellectual development of young students – to dust away the past and learn from it. History leads to change, change leads to fellowship. More and more people long for becoming a part of a bigger picture.

Bardejov is enormously rich in Jewish historical monuments and nowadays, it is a remarkable success that inhabitants become aware of them, followed by the whole nation, furthermore the whole world. I believe that the city and its inhabitants did not do right by the previous handling of such a significant heritage of Jewish ancestors. I doubt that the city council would allow to open a hardware store in any Christian church. Even though it's true that there is no longer any believer of the Jewish faith living in Bardejov region, I don't think this precious heritage our town history gives us, should be forgotten. The suburbia and its synagogue have right to stand and be used for their purpose. Churches are not put down neither when they are no longer in use. They shall be registered at the Monuments Board and attract the tourists. This could also be a solution in the case of preservation of Jewish monuments knowing that Jews travel to discover the footprints of their ancestors. Truth is that their interest in Bardejov is much bigger than one would think. Therefore Bardejov truly has a potential to become a destination for numerous Jews living abroad. Already today we can say that Bardejov is a popular site for the Sons of Israel but I believe that the interest could become larger. It is also necessary to attract and educate local population that does not have necessary knowledge about Jewish history of their town. Due to conservationists and volunteers, closure of the hardware store was enforced and renovation of the Old Synagogue started, for it to become a new pride of Bardejov once finished. At the time being, we are only awaiting its opening ceremony to the public that will also be allowed to enjoy this precious site.

In my opinion, the project of restoration of the Old Synagogue is sufficiently promoted in the city. I consider as a marvellous step the work on various significant projects due to which financial support from grants could have been acquired. It is pertinent to mention the participation of the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Slovakia.

People like to take pride in this project but not a lot of them understand the principal meaning of this restoration, however they are happy that even a small-sized town such as Bardejov can flaunt itself with a world unique monument which is the preserved complex of Jewish suburbia. They seem proud of the site itself nonetheless it seems they did not manage to uncover its essence. By this statement I mean to say that the restored site does not need to serve only as a showcase in form of a museum but ordinary people can also organize various

cultural events. If only they knew what kind of treasures there are in Bardejov (and I don't mean only the Jewish suburbia), they would allow themselves to be even prouder of the beautiful historical town they are living in.

Day by day they pass in front of these buildings without noticing them, not to mention that for a while ritual baths were abused for commercial purposes as a store. Noone seemed morally bothered at that time that hardware supplies can be purchased in such a historically important and valuable building.

My focus should not limit itself on the complex of Jewish building between Mlynská Street and Dlhý rad. Another two synagogues are part of the Jewish heritage in Bardejov, out of which one possesses the title of synagogue with true, genuine torah on Kláštorňá Street. Another preserved and already restored site is without any doubt the Jewish cemetery at Tehelná Street. Streets of Bardejov continue to show the signs of Jewish presence, it would be sufficient to open the eyes properly and find a true interest in town we are living in. Personally, I am glad that my high school studies opened my eyes and my heart started to blaze for the followers of the Moses religion. Inseparable from them are certainly the buildings in which they used to meet and pray. Even though these buildings are located in the part of forgotten Slovakia, it seems evident that Bardejov as a town possesses a sort of magnet that daily attracts more and more, not only Jews, but also followers of other religions from all around the world. In the background of this amazing project are organizations such as *Vita in suburbia* and *Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee* proving that it is not a virtue to flee to the west of our country or further to the world and join the elaborate society but the true value is in developing and working on culture and environment here in Eastern Slovakia because the region forgotten by Bratislava has a diverse range of surprises up its sleeve.

As I mentioned earlier, use of the Jewish moments can be so broad that if I started to make a list, it would be long enough to reach Jerusalem. From concerts of national orchestras through expositions to conferences. It is inappropriate to look at this space whilst considering it as Jewish and feel fear inside. A building cannot hurt you. Primordial thing is to look up on the ceiling ornamented by breathtaking symbols. For the epicurians, I propose a dare: reveal all the hidden meanings in the painted symbols, but I warn you, there is more of them than you could think. Beautifully ornamented surface, worth comparison with Moscow metro stations, would add up a significant value to the artistic experience of a ballet performance or another cultural event. These walls full of history will overwhelm every spectator.

Most certainly, we can also perceive Jewish suburbia as a museum and as a certain part of Bardejov heritage but we shall have a look at the complex of buildings also from the viewpoint of a developing cultural branch where a promising theatre group could play its drama. Theatre has long been missing on the list of Bardejov leisure activities together with the place adapted for it. Reconstruction and opening of the Old Synagogue could represent the first step to acquiring the title of a cultural Mecca of Eastern Slovakia for such a beautiful town that Bardejov truly is. Without any doubt it disposes with the conditions and material for obtaining of a similar title in the future.

Location is also suitable for founding a youth organisation for those curious to learn more about Jewish history, habits and traditions and it could simultaneously bring new ideas for use of this space. There are surely specialists in town that would bring their insight to the topic and that would with much pleasure provide information about Jews in Bardejov to curious students. It would help broaden their horizons and allow a higher concentration of intellectuals in town per square meter. Of course, I would not limit the attendance of these seminars to students as I remain certain that also broad public and elderly inhabitants would be just as interested in this topic.

Another idea would be a joint seminar with presentation of significant artists of Jewish origin who used to work in Bardejov. I must confess that myself I could not state one single Jewish composer, musician or painter from Bardejov. In this small town, there definitely alternated generations of talented Jews worth a mention. Public should get to hear about their talent and presented Jewish artists would not need to have Bardejov origins, for this cause, personalities originating from the limits of Eastern Slovakia could be considered.

Preservation of heritage comes as a given to me. That's how every single one of us should act towards historical monuments. They serve as reference of the past and warn against the future. I am glad to be part of a school unafraid to speak about Jewish history and where we frequently mention the fate of those less fortunate ones. Fate of hands that built numerous buildings that are nowadays visited by curious amazed tourists from all around the world.

Carry on Bardejov!