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Jewish monuments in Bardejov

What is a nation without monuments, palpable trace of human existence in a given time period and in a characteristic place?

Is it a culture of people, creation of their thoughts, emotions or only an ordinary matter that will later change into ruins and dust?

Mobilizations, war, Hitler. Those were not only mere words, sounded almost repulsive, left people shaken with fear, offended, tears in their eyes. Those were no longer words giving a matter of importance, they brought horror once pronounced.

And once the World War arrived to Bardejov already in September 1939, schools changed into military hospitals and across the main square, once full of smiling and happy people, there were suddenly marching soldiers on the move, through the town boomed tension and panic. Replace home comfort by the gun, die or fight. Men of Bardejov were called at the front, to leave their families and march towards Poland and Russia later on. Panic was rising, misery unceasing. People became witnesses of how dangerous sick desire for power can be, it was rising and soon without limits. How can a nation obey a leader who orders killing of other ethnicities?

Jewish community in Bardejov, representatives of then most endangered nation, were forced to sit by looking how all around them their nation suffered and as everything they have been building for years, fortune of their fathers and grandfathers, was taken away from them. How easily disappeared basic human rights, replaced by hate, greed, prejudice. Already one year after the declaration of war, first two hundred Jews from the town and its surroundings were dragged to work camps. Mass eviction of Jews to these camps started. The road on which waited only a slow and cruel exhaustion, hunger and death. In Bardejov, the plan to exterminate one of the oldest nations in the world, was put in action. It started by the liquidation of their property and shops and finished by the deportation of over 3700 people to the death camps. Saturday prayer in the synagogue was replaced by a gathering of family and relatives begging to survive till the next day. Young people started to hide, fled to Hungary.

Calm atmosphere in town was replaced by envy, distrust and betrayal. Places where until recently undisturbed religious and social life took place were suddenly empty. Voices praying to God in synagogues fell silent, there were 10 of them in town. Neighbours disappeared... Only mute witnesses in form of buildings remained after them and nowadays they represent the foundation of Jewish suburbia. When last traces of German army disappeared and Polish territory was liberated by Soviets, hope has risen in Jews. That the hell was over, years of torture behind them. However once they returned back home, many of them no longer found what they left behind. In many cases, their houses were occupied by majority inhabitants that had no intention to give up what they so easily acquired. Other buildings stood in ruins that used to represent an abode, work, place of worship, all around they found emptiness that could not be filled by neither the atonement nor the restoration of old homes. Once a man destroys the emotion and image he kept in heart, he will never find them in an original state. They are irreplaceable, unique, perfect and ordinary at once for human eye and soul. Man is after all tied to some material existence, something that helps him survive. Home, environment and his culture. Relying on hope that after the return from camp, there is a pleasant gasp awaiting in places too close to him in past but instead find ruins and a huge disgrace of not only himself but also his ancestors and memories of them. Synagogues, cemetery, people they used to meet everyday were long gone. There was nothing left but to flee to the cradle of their nation and origin of their history, eg. to Israel. And so, many years later, there were only a few buildings and a cemetery left after a strong and culturally rich nation. It is almost a sin to withdraw one important entity from history and not even try to replace it, leave a black hole behind a massacre that took place over 75 years ago. As if nothing have happened in this town and stories of people remain forgotten, memories of suffrage not revived. Town tried to bury its past.

Nonetheless there were people who decided to contribute by their work to restoration and save the remains of the cultural heritage of our Jewish fellow citizens, their fate didn't leave them indifferent. Due to various contacts, they managed to restore communication with their descendants, their continuity in life. Every person has a name and a destiny. They tried to collect and preserve the mosaic of nation that was to remain extinct. It is primordial to preserve what makes a human alive. Hopefully the names of those deported and murdered ones, engraved on boards of the Holocaust memorial will never be forgotten and their fate will be a memento to us all. It is crucial to forgive but we shall never forget because those unaware of their past tend to repeat the mistakes.

Holocaust Memorial, restored Old Synagogue, Beit Midrash school building are places suitable to get reminded of the past and the extent of mood radicalisation in society, to enjoy the possibility of learning by experience, to travel in time and try to feel, to understand. Many synagogues and cemeteries remain destroyed. Cemetery in Bardejov is a witness of a large Jewish community whose thread of life got cruelly torn. Gravestones are witnesses of our time.

Places mentioned above that used to serve for meditation, teaching or conversation with God can nowadays be used as places for reminiscence and education. Concerts, debates and expositions that would remind us of Jewish life then and today. Connection between the past and future. May there never be forgotten any person, space or event that significantly influenced life in Bardejov. Places where neighbours, families, acquaintances were separated since a long time, should serve for new encounters and bonding together. By uncovering the soul of people around yourself, uncover your very own self. This renovated space can bring an answer to the question ‚who am I and where I’m coming from‘. May we not remain simple beings stuck in a certain timelapse.

In 1970 started the road to restoration. Synagogue was declared cultural heritage and on the 2nd December 2000, the city centre of Bardejov and suburbia made it to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Synagogue is very valuable, besides city of Skalica there is no similar nine-vaulted building in Slovakia anymore, the more important was its reconstruction. Tradition began to fulfill and people proved their belief in moral values by these steps. Beautiful example of not being indifferent towards culture and terrifying events of the Second World War. Even though this deed does not apologise the injustice done in the past, the process of atonement have begun. It haven’t started only the restoration of the monuments but also the rectification of history. Although we cannot change it, we are able to amend the consequences. This is how the complex of suburbia formed by Assembly House Beit Midrash and mikvah bath, synagogue and tower, slaughterhouse became symbols of Judaism in Bardejov. Symbols of patience, perseverance and strenght. This building reminds us of the importance of moral values. How important it is to have knowledge about the past of our ancestors and observance of their traditions. We tend to say that Jewish religion is full of symbols, signs. The building that grew up right next to suburbia was built in this very same spirit. Holocaust Memorial was solemnly open in 2014. Set of boards with names that should forever be rememebered. Those perished under the millstone of nacism, innocent victims. It is an expression of respects, compliments, gratitude and admiration, regret and silent prayer for those who suffered unjustly. „Every person has a name“. Every name has its meaning, just as

its proprietor had in life. Names engraved in stone boards above which shines the eternal light are engraved not only in marble but also somewhere far in heaven because their actions, words and thoughts contributed to the course of history, because they behaved and died as true heroes to whom heaven belongs. No less important is that names of those unafraid to take a risk and ready to help are also mentioned on boards. Names of the righteous.

Although I am not Jewish myself I respect these places because they hide the secrets of war, stories forgotten over the years and misery experienced by a community that suffered because they were Jews, only Jews. In these places, fates of numerous innocent people were sealed. I respect the monuments reminding of Jewish community in Bardejov as Jews are one of the nations proud of their homeland, ancestors and history and they continuously intend to preserve not only the material but also the spiritual wealth. Even though I cannot clearly imagine what these men and women of Jewish ethnicity must have felt inside 75 years ago in these places, I remain certain they wished to see their children arriving to the places where originated their heritage and where their own destiny was inscribed in the book of life. They would wish to see faces proud and grateful for becoming who they are. Their wishes were heard and accomplished, I truly believe this lovely memory does not disappear. May there is no person forgotten or oppressed. We shall learn from the terrors of the past, for our own good and our children. For the preservation of memories, sustainability of present values and uplifting of the vision of future.