

A Mute Witness

At the beginning of every great story, there is one word.

The beginning words of my story are, “Help us...Have mercy...At least, the children...”. Behind these words is a plea of a helpless, defenseless human being, in an effort to oppose the law invented by man. The words epitomize a battle of conscience, heart, and courage against hypocrisy, fear and hatred. It is faith in the goodness of people and a plea for the power of humanity.

Humanity is a miraculous and powerful word, which enabled people to show extraordinary courage during times of dark historical events. Humanity also hides in the gentle waves of the Topľa River, which runs through Bardejov. There is plenty for everyone - just grab it in the palm of your hand. The wind blows it through Bardejov forests, paths, streets, houses, and directly to the cathedral in heart of the town square. The windows of our city's cathedral are like eyes—eyes that see everything. They've always seen everything. People see the Cathedral, not knowing that they are also seen, and that someday they will be judged - or rewarded.

The city of Bardejov used to be big enough for everyone: Christians and Jews, Slovaks, Ruthenians, and Roma. Each had a place in our town, which opened its arms to everyone. The streets, framed by the houses, did not distinguish between residences. The roots of the flowers, the trees, and the grass did not know boundaries; they grew from one backyard to the other naturally, like the friendships among the people.

But not everyone opened their hearts and hands to Humanity. Someone was closing his hands firmly in a fist. Someone who had only one intention: to transform our world and make it his own. He called the storm upon the world, and upon our city. The storm came with the thunder of cannons, the dust of rifles, and crimson drops of blood spilling out of the dark clouds. Shelter was offered only to certain ones.

The eyes of the cathedral saw it all. If they could have closed, they would have. If they could have cried, they would have, too. But they did not know how. They could only watch silently.

What happened was also seen by human eyes. But most people closed them—except for very few who did not try to avoid the truth. Their eyes were looking exactly where it was needed. Even through tears, their hearts preached them to act.

One of them was a big man. Walking down the street in his heavy robust boots, wearing a gray-green uniform with the symbol of our country, a hat covering his dark hair. The lights of the street lamps reflected off the metal pins that were proudly fixed to his wide chest - that of the servant, the guardian of order, “for better and for worse”. He served our city in the sunny days, but did not stop during the storm. Although he had to wear a different uniform, he still concealed Humanity in its pockets. He protected, when the strikes were given to those who didn't deserve them. He helped, when the train carried the works of the Creator to places of no return. He opened wagons and offered freedom to innocent souls.

These were times of fear and hopelessness, envy and hatred. The bad news was hidden in neat envelopes, arriving daily. Flying in the air from Bratislava to Bardejov and back from Bardejov to Bratislava ... Even the eyes of the cathedral did not see what was hiding in the envelopes. But they knew someone who knew. He was leaving the house at sunrise, distributing letters throughout the day and returning home at sunset. The leather bag full of names (of those who were to be deported) was too heavy. But Humanity helped him to carry the weight on his shoulders. It lifted his bag and sped up his steps. And another mission was added to the delivering the mail: Warn, help, save life. Listen to the voice of conscience.

But where does one hide when being chased after like a wild animal? Marked by a yellow star, one is like a fading flower. S/he's nobody. S/he is only branded as a Jew. Yet the light breeze of Humanity that blew through the storm opened a gate to a barn, an attic, and a cellar. The sacrifice of rescuers penetrated through the walls of a house at the border of our homeland and under a store, which was forced to change owners. And although they lived in the darkness for days, weeks, months, the darkness did not penetrate into their bodies. Their hope that the sun will touch them again, that they would be able to see the azure sky, and that the storm would disappear, stayed with them until the very end.

The colorful windows of the basilica, its eyes, knew about these heroic acts. They reflected the glory of these deeds, but they could not tell the world. They were simply watching in silence and recalling this story forever: The story of great people in a small town. The story of Humanity.

Then, the storm went away. The sun came out again, scaring away the terror. More than 70 years have passed since then... and the windows of the majestic church are still watching.

They saw those who decided not to sit idly by, who stood up and walked into the cold air of March 2018 with the desire to turn Slovakia into a decent country. They saw the fire in the hearts of people who were lighting the candles. The movement of flames was the expression of the thirst for change, the expression of the hunger for a fair future for us all.

Why does the desire to change the world according to our own ideas burn constantly in people's hearts? Why are they fighting for power, property, and glory? Why do those who are denied the fulfillment of their plans die?

The brave one who decided to talk and not be a silent witness died. The one who sought the truth wrestled with deceit and fought against the venom that was present also in our city. He fought against everything that kills Humanity. With his testimony he tried to reflect the truth – as if holding a mirror up to the world, but he died.

Let us start again. It is up to us to choose on which side we stand; how great we will become. The cathedral ages and its colors may be fading, but its eyes will always be looking at us. Whether we stand close or far, they will always follow the truth of our words, the honesty of our deeds and the direction of our steps...

We need to open our hearts and grab Humanity with our hands.

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