THE LESSONS OF THE HOLOCAUST

Hate is a powerful word. Hate is dangerous. Hate is everywhere among us. Most of all, hate can kill.

Undoubtedly, the Holocaust presents one of the darkest periods of dehumanization in the history of times. The names like "Auschwitz", "Treblinka", and many others are stinging reminders of places where Adolf Hitler with his adherents orchestrated the most gruesome crime known to humankind – bloodthirsty genocide. Heartlessly, they tried to fulfil their lunatic goals by eliminating those they believed were inferior – Jews, the Roma people, the disabled; simply all those whose blood was not of Aryan kind. No matter how much we may wish it could all be taken back, and the Holocaust was just a fictional story, we do not possess time machines to make such a thing possible. However, we can transport back in time by delving into the history of the Holocaust, by listening to the powerful stories of survivors, and importantly, never let the memory of those tortured and mercilessly murdered be forgotten. Indeed, we cannot take it back, nevertheless, I believe it is essential for us to learn from the eternal lessons the Holocaust brings to prevent history repeating itself once more.

Although the Jewish had been discriminated against and persecuted for centuries before, it is believed that it was mostly the Hitler influence that led people to turn their backs on their Jewish acquaintances and neighbours during his rise. If I may speculate, it is very probable that without his strong propaganda techniques, he would not have become a public figure, let alone risen to power. From my perspective, all citizens under this fascist dictatorship were deprived of their fundamental human rights since the "Hitler truth" based on gross distortion and conspiracy theories was the only promoted and acceptable viewpoint at the time. Bearing that in mind, people were told what to believe and must have obeyed, those who did not, were severely punished. In these fabricated stories spread by the Nazi Propaganda the Jewish people were portrayed as vermin, the "enemies" of the state who were trying to seize its economy and poise its culture, hence they must have been stopped. Needless to say, by practising these strategies, they had created an unliveable atmosphere for Jews, with violence waiting on them on every corner.

Moreover, what also disturbs me is the boundless manipulation of children from an incredibly young age that the Nazi supported; children who could barely read or write were, no questions asked, obliged to join the Hitler Youth. As I see it, by incorporating occasional "fun" bonding activities into their daily schedules, the children were subconsciously "programmed" into obedient soldiers praising the Führer's ideology, into the machines with the one main target – to hate the "enemy". Certainly, they will never be forgiven for the monstrous crimes some of them committed in their lives later, nonetheless, it is my belief that it was mostly the falsehoods learned from this organization they drew from when performing their horrific "duties".

The situation in my motherland Slovakia, then Germany's puppet state led by Josef Tiso, was almost indistinguishable, given by the fact that he not only publicly discriminated against Jews but also willingly sent thousands of them on their death row. Blindly, he tried to convince Slovak citizens of the enormous risk the Jewish people pose to Christian values and their guiltiness in sabotaging the economy. It sickens me to imagine that the streets of my town of Bardejov I walk through daily were once filled with detestable depictions of Jews in the forms of caricatures with derogatory inscriptions. Additionally, that they were referred to as "parasites" forced to isolate from the community of non-Jews, and soon afterwards, one by one,

began to disappear behind the Polish border and never returned. It also hurts me to imagine that generations of innocent people who could flourish and change the world in many ways, are now lost forever, that the whole community which once lived peacefully had become extinct. Today, their memory is present in the forms of eternal reminders that have been left behind - empty synagogues and countless names of my town's victims on an enormous black wall.

Despite all, some people could see behind the public façade and recognized Jews for who they actually were – not aliens, not enemies, merely innocent human beings discriminated against due to false accusations, as well as stereotypes. These are the people who others should take an example from, the ones who repeatedly risked their lives to protect the lives of an equal value.

Even though one may think that the Anti-Semitic ideology had become extinct with the end of world war, unfortunately, it still lies at the basis of not solely a few prejudicial minds of ignorant individuals, usually being based on similar misconceptions that the Nazi promoted. Furthermore, despite endless proof, the mindset of some might culminate in denying the Holocaust, in one's eyes being viewed as a ploy perpetrated by the Jews, which only supports one's unwillingness to take one's blindfolds off and comprehend the truth.

In Slovakia, nowadays, a great political risk is introduced by far-right extremist political parties, the most popular one being the People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS). On numerous occasions, they have referred to Josef Tiso as "the only real Slovak president"; it is important to realize here that they have been praising the same man who was responsible for the deportation of thousands of Jews which eventually led to their demise. Moreover, the members of this political party have demonstrated violent behaviour against minorities, and its leader – Marián Kotleba has been found guilty by the court for propagating sympathies towards movements that are oppressing fundamental human rights. Although there is far more proof to confirm the fascist sympathies of this political party, these reasons should be more than enough to convince the voters to stay away as far as possible. Yet, this political party still enjoys popularity, in particular amongst the younger population. We do not want history to repeat itself, nor get even a step closer to it, do we? Why do some people overlook the danger the extremist parties of such represent?

Indeed, the Holocaust demonstrates eternal proof of how the powerful officials were skilled in using psychological manipulation based on falsehoods to persuade masses of people that the Jewish cause a great threat to society, and of how this acquired hatred can eventually graduate into merciless murdering of the innocent. As opposed to Nazi Germany, fortunately, nowadays, one can benefit from freedom of the press and find credible sources of information. At the same time, however, the internet has created a dangerous place where disinformation spreads like a hurricane. Some are immune to it; others get consumed by it. Many individuals are prone to believe the most absurd articles, subsequently present the findings as truthful facts, which may influence others to act accordingly as well. Is there a solution for this? How can people become immune to disinformation based on conspiracy theories?

From my perspective, one of the most promising solutions lies in acquiring the ability to think critically. Unfortunately, in my opinion, in Slovak schools, there is not a sufficient amount of time devoted to its development. Without a doubt, history should be far more than just stories and years one must learn by heart in order to pass an exam since it is essential for us to be able to connect the knowledge from history and other subjects, to understand the world we live in today. Furthermore, to my way of thinking, a healthy dose of scepticism has never caused

anyone any harm; I would even say it is necessary to ask follow-up questions and ultimately come to a legitimate result. By being able to connect the dots by ourselves, we can grow up to be logically thinking, curious citizens with the ability to read between the lines. Importantly, we will not be deceived by the empty promises of politicians, as well as realize the historical significance of the risk the extremist movements pose. In addition, we will recognize the hoaxes and scams that are trying to manipulate us and mess with our minds.

We, the people, normally cannot prevent natural disasters, all the earthquakes, tsunami, floods, volcano eruptions, that have killed millions of people. As if that were not enough, the twisted minds of some contribute to unnecessary bloodshed and cruelty, often being blinded by their lust for power and superiority. As we should all know, it is all forms of discrimination and prejudice that make our society rotten since it was not only Hitler and Nazis who put races into diverse file folders based on their alleged importance. The disappointing truth is that people are constantly finding reasons to hate each other and exclude those whose culture differs. Yet only we, the people, have the power and the ability to create a safe environment full of compassion and understanding. Be that as it may, some individuals choose to spiral down in the tunnel of hatred and prejudice that often originates in the pool of fabrications. It is from the history of the Holocaust one can observe what hatred, prejudice, and racism can eventually lead to, thus we must realize that all human beings have always been equal, despite their race, religion, or social status. Above all, we ought to remember; we can choose not to hate, we can choose not to discriminate, we can choose to tolerate and respect.

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