

Heroes guilty of humanity alone

I hold a photograph of old Bardejov in my hands, figures in black kaftans and high hats look at me. They stand on the street where I stand today. Kindness can be seen in their gaze. All I see is the cold and empty ritual buildings of the Jewish suburbia where community life was concentrated. When did we allow hatred to grow to this point? And how come I am standing here today in spite of her? I will shine a light on the people who fought against the darkness at a time when it could, and cost some their lives. Because I value NOT only their courage, will or dedication, but also their cool head in times of panic and fear and high moral credit. Qualities that would help us in the fight against extremism even today. How many more times does history have to repeat itself? How many victims are already too many? Who will fear for their lives as much as they did?

Citizens' lives. Lives of Jews. Us and them. But first and foremost, they were people. Just like you and me. Stories of heroes forced by the Holocaust to act. They did good. Despite all the hatred that flowed around them, they did ONLY good. Although the Jewish community was an important part of the city and shaped its character both economically and culturally, this was not enough. The proof is in today's ONLY monuments that tell the story of the sixth largest Jewish community so loudly, and many of us still forget what all anti-Semitism has conglutated. The Holocaust, which sealed the lives not only of one third of the population of Bardejov but also of those outside the city limits, is a bitter reminder of the time when we needed heroes so much. People in whom courage triumphed over fear, morally pure decisions over commands, good triumphed over evil. Light over darkness. Saving over death. Humanity has triumphed. Something you would look for in vain after the publication of the Jewish Code.

"My friends started turning their backs on me. They stopped meeting me. They took us far away." Such was the fate of most young Jewish women and girls my age. Therefore, these heroes are rare. They didn't want to become them, they wanted to live happily. They sacrificed their own lives and safety. Own dwellings. Own acquaintances. Self-disclosure. They are from non-Jewish and Jewish fellow citizens, but there are also people in concentration camps. They managed to survive hell. They did not succumb to tremendous oppression and retained the face of a savior. They extended a helping hand to their fellow prisoners, although they themselves grinded from the last, in conditions rightly called hell on earth. They did not give in.

Winton, Schindler, Willow, Wetzler, Galinsky, Rozin, Löwy.... They did good when evil was called to them. They were brave when courage was forbidden. Deprived of rights, cramped

into wagons and taken to extermination and concentration camps. camps full of fear, they found within themselves the strength to resist. Not to give in easily like a herd, ready for slaughter. Fear for oneself alternated fear for others. Heroism was interwoven with constant fear, but at the same time embroidered with a golden thread of courage.

The approaching wave of deportations in Bardejov revealed one of them. On March 20, 1942, women and unmarried girls began to concentrate in Bardejov. **Rudolf Löwy** knew that he could neither prevent nor prevent what awaited them. As an influential citizen of the city, he learned about the upcoming deportations. Faith and conviction did not allow him to escape, and although as a relatively wealthy person he could hide, escape and save himself with false documents, he did not do so. He risked his own exposure. The conscience, honor and responsibility he felt towards them did not allow him not to act, not to help, not to contribute. Together with Drs. Grosswirth and Atlas, they tried to create a false typhus epidemic and thus save Bardejov's Jewish women and girls from deportation. After the procedure, the girls were released. The rest left on the morning of March 21 in cattle wagons to Poprad and from there on March 25 on a journey to the unknown – to Auschwitz. 999 women. The action was revealed. The Gestapo came for Löwy, crammed him into a car and ran to catch the last transport. Along with him left a letter entitled: Rudolf Löwy, more dangerous than 1,000 Jews!! His life was extinguished on 3.6.1942 in Auschwitz, where he died after several weeks of torture. A thousand women never became mothers again, nor did they meet theirs again, they were no longer daughters. All that remains are the names that we read today in the memorial from long lists and do not forget. We must not. However, these figures are only the beginning.

The heroines of the tragedy were also Jewish women - mothers. I had the extraordinary opportunity to hear the testimony of a child whose mother fought against the Holocaust and its traumas even after the war. Through her story, I would like to highlight the incredible strength of courage that armed her for this fight. It is the story of Stefan Zora's mother, a woman who ran away from death with a child in her arms. "Without her heroism and defiance, I would not sit in front of you today, without her efforts to save her, I would not have had a chance to save her later. To bring light, joy and hope to the dark times with my birth.

Unfortunately, my mother fell into the hands of those who did not have love in their hearts three times. In her last hiding place in November 1944, when she was exhausted and down, she wrote a letter and sent it to 17-year-old **Maria Čemeríčková**. She herself was hiding other people in the basement. From food and water, warm clothes and hygiene items, she also provided them

with toys for children, who often cried all night. My mother begged her for money. If she didn't pay, a local peasant nicknamed 'The Whistleblower' would fire her."

Heroism is not just about rescue itself. It was also heroic for her to start a new life. She was met with slander and uncertainty, because a yellow star was still burning on her chest, but the defenseless young woman still found the strength to fight. She didn't lose hope just when everyone around her lost her. She retained the heart of the warrior that life taught her to be. In the greatest winter, she waded through the snow, seeking shelter in the dark forest. For a week, she hid in the open air in sub-zero temperatures. Persecuted like a hunted beast, fleeing from "human beasts". It was found completely frozen by the defender Čermák, who hid it with Tom deep in the treetops – in a grove in Fabiánská valley. There they spent a long 4 months. Until the liberation of Nitra, until April 1, 1945. After spending time in hiding, she learned of her husband's fate from a group of other fleeing Jews. Géza was surrendered, taken away by the Gestapo and deported to Auschwitz, where he died at the age of 42.

Our heroes have lost too much, yet they have been saved. With tremendous trauma rooted in their soul. Like a kind of rot, something smelly and bad, something they weren't really responsible for. Marked by the cruel crimes of others, they now tried to get into life, it was their new victory. Thanks to the courage and fearlessness of a 17-year-old girl, the rescuer Maria, the two life paths of our heroines came together with the hope of **my Jewish mother, Lenka**. An ancient and dark but shared history of the victims of Hitler's Nazi terror in Europe, experienced separately but equally by both. Not just anyone can help so selflessly and courageously. Mary became the light at the end of the tunnel to those who fought for survival. But she also fought for survival herself. A person with a pounding heart, but a human face, which she did not lose even in difficult moments. She was able to face not only death, but also the darkness that engulfed my mother and father, but also Tom just because they were Jewish..." The heroism and courage of two women together created a circle of life, into which they instilled with their hope faith in something stronger than death.

It was brave to stand up to a society full of criminals and collaborators at a time when only a small group of determined people dared to do so. They were guided by love of neighbor, fearlessness, which put their heroism on a pedestal. Stories of heroism show us that ultimately what matters is not what we do for ourselves, but what we don't do for others. A well-known Jewish proverb says whoever saves one human life seems to save the whole world. This proverb reflects the power of the moral compass within us. But how far did hatred have to go to consider the struggle for survival to be considered heroism? Heroism had nothing to do with profit, the

rescuers simply wanted to look in the mirror every morning and see human dignity in it. One must earn it and wear it as a badge of honor that one never loses.

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