

Heroism at the time of the Holocaust

A hero, a person who is extraordinary, stands out for his actions, attitudes, courage. But who do we consider heroes these days? Children see heroes in science fiction films, where they fight evil and want to protect the world from hostile robots. The struggle of good and evil, both in fairy tale and in life. But let's be honest, being brave nowadays is not so difficult. In the conditions in which we live, what we can do, it can be done if one has the willingness and possibilities to do so. So who are the real heroes and what was their motivation? The history of human history shows us many examples of heroic deeds that should never be forgotten. And so were the heroes who acted at the time of the Holocaust. Let's face it, when we just thought about the fates of people who survived the horrors of the Second World War and the heroes who lost so much. They lost loved ones, their homes, they felt hatred firsthand. Fear and memories of war became their identity, a nightmare that accompanied them for the rest of their lives. No one realized what psychological problems and burden these victims bore.

So let's go back to the past. What do we find in it? Fates of innocent people, targets of hatred, marginalized, disenfranchised, marked with a yellow star and a number for easier identification. They were deprived of their identity, of their own name, of their human dignity, of their freedom and, ultimately, of their lives. Many watched helplessly and did not believe, not knowing what to conceive and how to stop that nightmare - the Holocaust. Finally, they were loaded into cattle wagons and taken to extermination camps. Images associated with the Holocaust such as wagons, crowds of people going to death, hunger, filth, disease, hard work, wires, selection, ramp, tattooed numbers, Auschwitz-Birkenau, gas chambers, chimneys and death. We know all this from movies, books and testimonies. We have all those horrors stored somewhere in our subconscious, but I feel like it doesn't touch us anymore. The life of my heroes was marked by these very events. Therefore, the question arises, was it easy for them to act boldly?

Even today, we cannot give a rational argument to the question: "why, what they are guilty of". Was it a disagreement with Nazi ideology? Did Hitler feel, like the ruler of the world, who has the right to decide on the life and death of people who did not fit the criteria of the Aryan race? Propaganda, hatred and fear crept hand in hand with society and managed to deceive many people. It was a form of ideology that was built on racism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, and culminated in genocide. But no less serious were the myths that spread throughout society and created the background for the legitimacy of the political fight against pests. The historical and economic context is familiar to us, but what about the social and moral context? Where have the foundations of humanistic morality, charity, compassion and empathy, responsibility disappeared so easily? After all, they are the foundation of humanity.

The Holocaust had its perpetrators and victims, collaborators, a silent majority. But also heroes who rightly deserve to stand in the spotlight. What made them special? Their actions manifested themselves on different levels. Whether it was Christians who were not afraid to help and hid their Jewish friends in barns, basements of their houses, in the forests, bringing them food and everything necessary for survival. They helped with escapes and fake documents. They were willing to take risks and lend a helping hand. We know the names of rescuers such as N. Winton,

who organized trains with Jewish children to England, or such as O. Schindler. They were not deterred by fear or by the excessive risk they were exposing. But there were also Jewish heroes who didn't give up, didn't succumb to pressure and fear, and took conscious risks. They resisted in the camps, organized aid as best they could, managed to preserve courage and a human face even in the greatest hell. Whether it was doctors like Gizela Pearl, who secretly aborted young women to survive, Mala Zimetbaum, who was the messenger in Auschwitz and at times proved the impossible. These were courageous women whose defiance was their main driving force. They didn't look at each other. In the same way, Jewish boys were involved in organizing the resistance, they went over to the partisans. The heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto, who were not deterred by an unequal struggle, were also an example of immense courage. They proudly raised their heads and stood up to resistance, which was cruelly suppressed. They knew they had no chance of winning, yet perhaps it was youthful recklessness that dampened their fear and strengthened their defiance. They fought not just to be in the history book, but to express their disagreement with Nazi ideology and not allow themselves to be led like a defenseless, humble herd for execution. Weakly armed, but with his head held high, he proudly. They did not desire to be heroes, they only wanted to preserve their honor.

The well-known escape of Slovak Jews R. Vrba and A. Wetzler also became a powerful message of courage. Rudolf Vrba was first deported to Camp Majdanek in Poland. He was later transferred to Auschwitz. He became a prisoner of 44,070. Eventually, lucky, with little hope of survival, he was assigned to a Canada labor squad that employed 2,000 men and women on a Jewish ramp. They removed people's dead bodies. On 15.1.1943 this commando was transferred to Birkenau – death camp. Here Vrba met Wetzler, who was a prisoner of 29,162. Allegedly, these two real heroes knew each other before and decided to attempt a planned escape. On Friday, April 7, 1944, they went on the run. They were also helped by the camp resistance, in which there were good people who believed that one day this hell in the world would end. The inmates, who did not have the courage to flee because they were held by fear for their lives, helped them and covered them with boards while they hid in a dug hole. That evening, the camp commandant announces their escape. They spent 3 days in hiding, then made their way to the Polish-Slovak border when they encountered a German patrol. However, they were lucky and the escape succeeded. After arriving in Žilina, they wrote a 32-page detailed report to help the world know the truth about what was happening in the extermination camps. Credible and detailed information was published there, which they provided to the Allies. It was published by BBC radio and The New York Times. They demanded that they stop mass deportations. But at first, the world didn't believe them. Human reason was reluctant to believe these unimaginable atrocities.

The light on their journey was personal courage. They decided to help innocent people and open the eyes of the world to the atrocities committed by the Nazis. They were not interested in their personal rescue. In the camp positions they had, they could have lived to see the end of the war with better luck or perish while escaping. Hungry, poorly dressed, exposed to random people in unfamiliar terrain, having to rely on the help of the villagers, they did not hesitate. The unbreakable power of defiance, but also of natural fear, not to be led like sheep to

execution, triumphed in them and gave them strength. It was an inner force marked by humanity that drove them. Sacrificing yourself on behalf of others.

Nor should we forget the people who hid young children, who could not understand what was happening and why their parents abandoned them. These decisions were very difficult and made for their patrician good so that they would have at least some chance of life. Yes, these people were also real heroes. There are still survivors from whom we can learn what really happened and what they experienced firsthand and saw the horror inflicted on their loved ones. I was personally interested in a story that happened in Bardejov, where a young Jewish family entrusted their newborn child to a couple who had a taxi service and they took him to Giraltoviece. I can't even imagine what parents who were forced to abandon their child in this way must have felt.

Heroism is also the main motto of the award "Righteous Among the Nations". We will not know the names of all the heroes who deserve it, but it is important not to forget those we know about. Unfortunately, today's time, which favours the rise of extremism and radicalisation, anti-Semitism, contributes to the fact that people are afraid to confess to talking about the heroic deeds of their families. I am not surprised, after all, who would want to remember that Jewish families were murdered and relatives did not know what was wrong with them or whether they would ever see them again. Bardejov also has its Righteous. Some are also written as "Righteous Among the Nations" (A. Bomba, Š. Tarcalá, J. Kisel, V. Kyjovský, A. Židishin). I am glad that our city also found people with hearts in the right place. Humanity was not alien to them, and fear did not tie their hands. They were able to act in the name of Christian and humanistic values, out of love of neighbor. These were the real heroes because they risked their lives to save someone else. Could we find that strength in ourselves today? I am afraid to answer this question when I see how otherness is once again being targeted and how many young people continue to believe various unsubstantiated reports, myths and look for targets for their anger and frustration.

We should learn from the past and not repeat mistakes. Talk more so that the evil and pain experienced by these heroes is not forgotten. We are obliged to pass on the witness that we young people also bear, so that it will be preserved for generations to come. Never again.

These people were real, those who were able to prevail morally, and victory became their permanent stamp on their souls. Yet they suffered because they couldn't save more people, help each other more...

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