

The Righteous of Bardejov – a story of bravery and heroism

They made decisions based on a clear definition of what was good.

Have you ever wondered how a writer would respond to the question: “Where do you find the greatest inspiration?” Most likely, the answer would be: “You have to look for it in people.” I used to find this answer surprising in various discussions. I did not understand how such great writers could draw inspiration from such unpleasant people that we encounter in everyday life. But that was before I met people whose eyes reflected the greatest horrors and whose words sent shivers down my spine. People you would rather hug and lend a helping hand to, regardless of whether you know them or not. People I could read about and listen to for hours, and whose stories have caused an avalanche of all kinds of emotions within me. These are the survivors of the Holocaust and the epidemic called Nazism. I realized that there's an endless well of inspiration within every person. All you need to do is open your eyes. Some inspire me to do good in this world. They make me believe that it's still worth it. But others give me a textbook example of the kind of person I never want to become. And so, I have also learned to look for inspiration in all sorts of people.

I am often struck by how unstable human nature is and how easily it can be manipulated. We develop prejudices and stereotypes and do not even consider whether our actions are right. We pride ourselves on the values that we develop, and constantly stress the importance of morality. And yet, something that seems so clear to all of us can become unexpectedly unclear. So, I wonder, how is it possible that during the Second World War, the longstanding human values were no longer respected? How is it possible, that interpersonal relations were worse than those between wild animals? How could it happen, that people allowed hatred and ignorance to grow to such enormous proportions? Who knows... There is one fact, however, that fascinated me about that time. Among those who didn't even deserve to be called "people," were a few others who displayed noble solidarity. These were the people who realized that something bad was happening and decided not to sit back and watch. They took the burden of responsibility and saved many lives. They knew that their actions could not save the entire world, but they did make a difference in the lives of individuals by giving them a chance to survive. The question remains: What motivated these people to help? Whether it was divine law, conscience, or any other motive, these people had a specific idea of what “good” is and did not hesitate to act accordingly. They were able to discern what was truly good.

There were at least seven such people in Bardejov district. Compared to the population at that time, this number was very small, but in the end, we should be glad that it is not even smaller. You might think that these were respectable people whose words meant something in the town. You would be wrong. Such remarkable bravery was mostly shown among the most ordinary people such as merchants, postmen, priests, or policemen. Many may be surprised to learn that they possessed not only great wisdom and foresight, but also a strong sense of humanity. They were proof that the most important feature of civilization is human kindness, a trait lacking even in

today's world. We should be inspired by these people and continue to spread their ideas. This is the only way to make our future brighter.

In Lebu Ungarov's poem, one of the policemen is portrayed as someone who was born for his job. He wore his uniform with dignity and pride and was not just an ordinary policeman, he was also a true gentleman. Adam Bomba had his own family and four children to take care of. Still, he chose to risk his life. He hid the Jews in his attic and barn. If he was on duty near the wagons, he would let them escape into the woods to save themselves. He went as far as providing them with fake documents. His 17-year-old son also helped. One night, he led a family through the forest to the village of Zlaté, where they found a shelter at his uncle's house. Bomba's daughter remembered that another brother, who was just 8 years old at the time, was always concerned about his father. He hoped that nothing bad would happen to him, that he would not be shot dead. I can't imagine what policeman Bomba's children had to go through. Likewise, I can't comprehend the challenges he faced. The true reason behind his selfless acts will probably never be known. Nevertheless, I think that his brave heart and his belief in justice were responsible for his actions in the first place. It is people like Adam Bomba who are sorely missed in today's world.

This policeman was working with another righteous man. His name was Štefan Tarcala who was the Ariztor of Mr. Neuman's business in the town square. However, things were not as they appeared at first glance. Štefan Tarcala might have taken control of Neumann's cellar, but he secretly hid several Jews in it, people whose lives were also at risk. Every evening, he let them out and allowed them to breathe fresh air and to do their basic needs. Even these things were not as obvious as they are today. He bought them food and took care of them until the liberation of Bardejov.

Hearing about the story, I pictured the cellar as a lit room full of potatoes and old junk, much like the cellar at my grandmother's house. However, this image vanished as soon as I entered Neuman's cellar. As someone who has rarely been without a thing in life, my first thoughts were that I would rather get caught than spend 4 months in this place. Of course, I wouldn't. However, the tangle of inhospitable underground labyrinths beneath the town square, the darkness, the cobwebs, and who knows what else was lurking in the shadows, made me feel not very good about spending even a single day there. After the liberation of Bardejov, seven hidden Jews came out of the two cellars in the town square.

Postman Jozef Kisel also contributed to the fight for humanity. Not only did he shelter Jews in his own home, he also warned people about deportation orders based on notes that arrived to the post office. He also often acted as a link between the Jews and policeman Bomba. It is fascinating that even, dare I say, an ordinary postman found a way to help and not be indifferent to people in need. Jozef Kisel embodied life's most crucial values, making him an exceptional individual whose name should not be forgotten and left in the dust.

Outside of the Jewish community, a Greek Catholic priest, Andrei Zhidishin from Reshov, also helped. He saved the lives of many Jewish inhabitants by hiding them in his rectory and

selflessly offering them shelter. Among those who were saved, the story of Edmund Grossmann, later Gond, touched me the most. He was a dentist who received a presidential exemption. His daughter and grandson recall that when Andrei Zhidishin learned that the exemptions were expiring, he stopped a wagon with horses in front of the office and forced Edmund Grossmann to get in. He hid him in the rectory in Reshov until the liberation. After the liberation, a Russian soldier found him and asked who he was and what he was doing there. He answered that he was a Jew and was hiding. At that very moment, the Russian soldier burst into tears. When Edmund Grossmann asked him why he was crying, he replied that during the whole journey from Moscow, he was the first living Jew he had met. Thanks to Andrei Zhidishin, Edmund Grossman (and others) could live many more years surrounded by their beloved family.

The good deed of Anna Koperniechova was not forgotten either. Thanks to her, books and other important documents were preserved. She protected the Bikur Cholim synagogue by barring the doors and windows, and not letting anyone in. She found more courage in herself than any other man who just sat by and watched the atrocities that were being committed. She cared more, perhaps, than she cared for her own life. She was convinced that she was doing the right thing, and not even fear could deter her.

The merchants František Gabor and Vasil Kyjovsky also showed great sympathy. Both saved several families from certain death by sheltering them in their dwellings. Not only did they provide shelter, but they also supplied them with food and other basic needs. This was very dangerous because neighbours at that time were not people you would normally go to for a cup of coffee. If they noticed anything suspicious, they wouldn't hesitate to turn you in. The advantage of hiding in the village was the proximity to the forest, which was a good refuge. If you took more food than you needed, you would automatically raise suspicion that there were more people at your house and consequences of committing a hostile act against the state would be fatal. Would you be willing to take such a risk?

The people who survived these atrocities will never forget those who kept them alive. Their rescuers have influenced them so much that they strive to give something more to this world and live life to the fullest. The horrors of the Holocaust made them appreciate the little everyday things that we often take for granted.

I am sure that there is no darker period in human history than the Second World War. It is very good that these events are still talked about. However, I regret that nothing is being done to prevent the repetition of such events. You would think that the advanced humanity of the 21st century would be sufficiently aware, but looking at society, it is obvious that it is declining rather than advancing. Once again, demagoguery is beginning to spread among us, promising order, work, and unrealistic welfare. However, with a little common sense, we can very easily decipher what these people want to bring into the present. Having the ability to speak is wonderful, but only if you avoid talking nonsense and attempting to turn people into heartless savages once more.

I think that anyone can name what is failing in the system and promise the impossible without restraints. Young people, however, do not associate the "brown parties" with fascism, and that is only because they have not experienced it. I have never been ashamed of being Slovak. But when I see how a lot of people in Slovakia lack common sense, I am slowly reconsidering my positive attitude towards this nation. First, we should all realize what was the cause of the rise of extremism and intolerance in the past. The seemingly innocent "slaps" inflicted on the Jews grew into a catastrophe. I will never understand how the horrors of the Holocaust could unfold right in front of the public's eyes. Unfortunately, we must admit that there are plenty of supporters of this ideology. But I wonder how many people are truly willing to stand up for genuine values!

How is it possible that we applaud the principle of the radical solution? Does it mean that we are indifferent to the suffering of others? Would we mind if small children had to hide in filthy shelters? Would it be okay if they had to look at corpses all around them, assuming they weren't one of them? Would we be able, in good conscience, to take away their carefree childhoods and compel them to grow up prematurely? Would we allow them to starve and live in insecurity without any remorse? Wouldn't we be horrified by the separation of families and the loss of loved ones because of mere psychopaths? Do we have the right to start handing out slaps and gradually increase the strength? Can small children beat up their peers just because their parents say they are different? Yes, all of this can happen because as humans we have already failed once before, and we have allowed something like this to happen. Remember, if we do not stop these things, the situation will escalate rapidly. Faster than we can imagine.

The brave individuals from Bardejov, to whom I dedicate this essay, were aware of who they were dealing with and understood the gravity of the potential consequences of their actions. Nevertheless, they chose to do good and did what they thought was right and necessary. They acted according to their conscience and belief. They did not let themselves be swayed by stupidity or ignore common sense. Do you know why? Because the good feeling of helping others is unique and the value of humanity is greater than all the wealth in the world. Based on this belief, they managed to change the world for many people.

A common notion is that communication and conversations about values are important. I think there are enough of those. As a society, we are rather deficient in putting them into effect. We tend to feel unaffected by war, especially when it seems like there's little we can do to make a difference. And yet, all we must do is fight the cynicism that surrounds us. Our political leadership approves rather than disapproves of the current situation in Slovakia. Therefore, if they do not have the courage, at least we do – the rational part of the population that is still capable of thinking straight. It seems that the insignificant individuals have more power than they think. Isn't there enough evidence to support the idea that you do not have to be a politician or a millionaire to make a difference in the world? All you need is courage, a kind heart, and good judgment.

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