

The tragedy of the Jewish neighbours - to forget or to remember?

The issue of the Holocaust is a European trauma, and therefore, also a part of 20th Century Slovak history. However, it is important to remember that the Holocaust was not only a tragedy for the victims but also a tragedy for all those who were involved. Nowadays, we live in a chaotic period of intolerance and hatred, where people kill each other simply because of a different nationality, origin, religion, or simply because of a different opinion. Therefore, I believe it is now more important than ever to remind ourselves of the causes, the course, and the consequences of the Holocaust.

This year, on the 2nd of June 2015, we will commemorate the very first anniversary since the opening of the Holocaust Memorial in Bardejov. The memorial depicts 3,292 names of Jews who were deported from Bardejov and its surrounding villages. For some, the 70 years since the end of the world's deadliest global conflict, the end of the Second World War, may seem like a long time to forget these tragic events. Is it even possible to forget? I believe that time will heal all wounds, but the scars will remain forever. Scars that will carry a message to future generations to never again allow mass murder on such a massive scale. These people were guilty of nothing, except being Jewish. All that is left of them are empty houses, streets, and memories.

The first reports of Nazi extermination camps began to circulate in 1942. They were vague reports, but they revealed murder on an enormous scale, carried out with unprecedented cruelty and supported by a precise bureaucracy. Members of the SS were aware that everything that took place behind the walls of the concentration camps was so monstrous that it was hard to believe the stories of people who came back. On the other hand, the extermination camps were mortally dangerous for Germany because they hid the secrets of the suffering of millions of Jews of enormous proportions. Despite the efforts to keep everything secret, the facts that were revealed over time changed people's perceptions.

It is natural and self-evident that a substantial part of the material for reconstructing the truth about the concentration camps consists of the memories of the survivors. There are around 180,000 of them alive today. Regardless of the regret or outrage they provoke, they must be accepted and not condemned.

Despite the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cambodian autogenocide, and many other brutal and senseless wars we have seen, the Nazi concentration camp system remains unique in both its scale and its character. In no other place and at no other time have we witnessed such an unexpected phenomenon – the industrial factories of death. Never have so many human lives been taken in such a short time. In these moments, a question arises that we should all reflect on. What can each of us do to remain humane in this world full of threats? The Holocaust was the only case where war was declared for racial reasons and not against a neighbouring nation or state, or for economic, strategic, or political reasons. Why? I think one point should be clear to us. It was a planned radical revolution, a revolt against everything that existed before then.

How could it happen that such cultured people, who lived in the centre of Europe and built one of the greatest civilisations, adopted such an ideology? At the heart of the strategy to destroy anyone who was considered different was the Holocaust – the plan for the total annihilation of the Jewish population. But the worst thing about the Holocaust is finding out that the Nazis were ordinary people. Their fate was tragically marked by unfortunate circumstances. Many people wonder how the SS and former guards differed from the rest of us. They were from the same world as us, they were human beings too, they were not monsters. But they were brought up differently. They were brought up under the influence of Hitler's ideas and instructions. A few regretted it, and carefully helped the prisoners, or chose suicide rather than to continue watching the prisoners suffer. Most people are inclined to think that whatever happened then cannot be repeated by anybody, and that it could only happen in Germany. That's wrong! This can happen anywhere and by anybody.

The names of all those united by the tragic fate of deportation hold a unique story, but only a few of those stories have been told. Even though many of us have not experienced the bitter taste of suffering and horror, we should at least light a candle at the memorial to remember those who experienced these terrible moments first-hand. I wonder, is it right to turn a blind eye to the truth? The truth is sometimes cruel, and the truth about the fate of the Jews is no exception. Let us have the humanity not to forget the tragic stories of people who were no different from the rest of us. They were just born Jewish.

A man who has been hurt seeks to get rid of the memory so as to not renew the pain. A man who has hurt pushes the memory as far down as possible to free himself from it, to weaken his sense of guilt. No one can put themselves in the shoes of those who had to suffer so much. These people suffered because they were of a different nationality and a different religion, but they did nothing wrong, they did not harm anyone. The words of the Austrian philosopher Jean Améry resonate deeply: "Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained."

I must say again, with sadness, that injustice cannot be removed - it persists over time. Let us find a pinch of courage! Let us not be cowards and try to look the truth straight in the eye. It cannot be denied that these events are tragic; the fate of the Jews is more than sad. However, if we look at these dark moments objectively, we will see that they simply cannot be forgotten. Only those who suffered can forgive. But our task is to never forget. The events of the Holocaust took place approximately 75 years ago. One might assume that the last word on this subject has long since been spoken, and interest in this specific genocide should be slowly declining. However, the opposite is true. Every week, a new book or movie is released, or someone comments on this topic. There are no words to express what one saw and experienced at that very moment. The human mind cannot comprehend all the evil of which man was capable of, a man worse than an animal. Again, one should ask why. I do not think that the answer I am going to give will be better than any other, but I would still like to mention it. For the first time in history, people from three or four

generations, in this case of Jewish descent, were sentenced to death simply because they were born Jewish. Just being born that way was a death sentence that had to be avenged by execution. This has never happened before.

As the pious inscription on the wall of the Holocaust Memorial says: “Every person has a name”, and every one of those names has a story. I also hope that we will be able to tell as many stories as possible—stories of people who suffered a very tragic fate in the concentration camps—so that the wider public can learn what these names hold. Behind each name there is a unique story; a story that out of respect for the people, should be told.

In the spirit of the idea that "Whoever does not know his past is doomed to relive it," I would argue that the events of the Second World War associated with the genocide of the Jews should serve as a warning. They remind us that something similar could happen again at any time. This now raises a question that we should all consider. Has history taught us anything? People rarely learn from history, and the history of the Nazi regime is no exception. In school, we are taught about generals, politicians, and philosophers... But we avoid learning about the dark sides of history—the mass murders, the agonies, the suffering that screams in our faces throughout history. We still fail to grasp the fact that we will never be able to curb the tendency to destroy each other if we refuse to talk about it. Let us realize one sad fact: human beings are the only creatures on the whole Earth that are capable of destroying themselves. Even though these events are more than lamentable, it does not mean that we should forget about them. In my opinion, it is even our duty not to forget. These memories must be preserved forever, out of respect for those who had to experience them first-hand, just because they were Jews.

We should bear in mind that Holocaust deniers will not disappear despite the advancement of technology, the Internet, and other media. On the contrary, their efforts to erase and deny history will become even easier. That is the reason that many of us ordinary people who are not different in any way, but who at least have a bit of common sense, are here to support the effort to remember the past. To keep such incidents from happening in the future, it is important to preserve the memory of the victims and the events, and to educate the next generations about it. Because the memory of history is eternal, and there is no escape from memories. That's how it should be. Auschwitz—the place where millions died—deserves to not be forgotten.

Jakub Čopák, Gymnázium L. Stöckela Bardejov