

"Acts of the righteous"

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More than 70 years have passed since the end of the largest armed conflict in human history. The war claimed many lives, regardless of origin, age, race, or religion. The religious denominational issues were mostly felt by those who professed Judaism. Later on, even those with a Jewish mother found themselves categorized primarily by their racial identity. A high percentage of them were inhumanely killed in the camps within days. However, despite the bad political and social situation, some noble people still had their hearts in the right place in such a bitter time. They did not overlook the fact that thousands of innocent people disappeared from the streets daily. Although they were not related, their willingness to help was strong, and they did not just stand idly by. As part of our field trip, we visited a synagogue in Košice where we had the opportunity to meet the daughter of one of the survivors.

“My name is Anna Weiss. I live near the Tatra Mountains with my large family. This place used to be safe for us, but time changed everything. The struggle for survival began when the fascists had an eye on every single Jew. In Kežmarok and its surroundings, our community consisted of about 1,560 people. In 1941, hell reached our homes. They began to search each of us, taking our valuable things and possessions. Soldiers smashed windows, including those of shops. They were destroying everything that belonged to us Jews. I was afraid. I was very afraid for my relatives. My younger siblings were expelled from school, my mother was forced to do hard labour, and I had to work in a factory. While my wage did not exceed 3 crowns, the wages of others in the same position were much higher, but we could not complain. We lacked nothing until the “final solution to the Jewish question” was adopted in the form of the Jewish Code, full of restrictions and orders.

But there was one morning that was different from the others. I woke up to a heavy cough that had persisted for quite some time. I could see everyone running down the street through the window, and so I started looking for my parents. I found them in the kitchen, packing food. My question was simple. Why? Their answer confused me. They said, "We are going to start a new life. Things will get better for us". I did not dare to even think about the question of “where” because I knew it was pointless. Those who heard their names announced over the radio were instructed to gather in front of the station. From there, they were to be transported in wagons to what was promised to be a "better life." Few people had any idea where these trains were going, and that a one-way ticket would take us to neighbouring Poland. "Anna Weiss", I heard. At that moment, a shiver went down my spine. I did not want to go there. This was my home. Together with my husband, we decided to defy the order and not go to the station.

We ran back to our apartment, where we broke everything to simulate the Nazis' early visit and make it seem that there was no one in the house. The only thing that remained was finding a safe hiding place for both of us. When we heard the approaching footsteps of the Nazis, our eyes met instantly, filled with fear. I thought to myself: "What now?" And so, the

first place that came to my mind was the bed. I laid down under the blanket on the left side of the bed and my husband hid in the closet. The heavy footsteps grew in intensity, and we waited with bated breath for the "approaching visitors". Even though Jews were considered wise and educated people, my German language skills were quite poor. I could hardly understand them at all. It was a surprise when the bed next to me on my right side bent over. The thought flashed through my mind, "This is the end of us." At that moment I stopped breathing. After a while, our "visitors", perhaps a bit lazy, considered this apartment checked and cheerfully walked away. For two days straight, we waited in silence, without any food, until the German soldiers finally left our town. We were grateful to God for every extra second we survived. After two days, we scattered through the back entrance into the nearest forest where we felt safer. I do not dare to guess how much time we spent wandering in the woods. A few days, a week, a month...

When we had lost our last hope, we came upon a man in hunting clothes, wearing rubber boots and carrying a rifle on his shoulder. It was nice to meet a man after such a long time, but we immediately wondered whether this man was also our enemy. He, however, smiled kindly at us and offered his assistance. He warmly welcomed us and invited us to join him for lunch. We were greeted by an elderly lady who immediately took us in and gave us everything she could possibly think of to comfort us. Even though this was a strongly religious Christian family, they gave us as much as they could. A sense of security, love, and temporary safety. Why did they do that? Until now I have no idea what prompted them to do that. After all, we were foreigners and Jews. They hid us in the attic of the barn for over two years, even though their sons were gendarmes. They brought us food in the morning when the gendarmes changed their shifts.

Everything was going smoothly until our benefactors were caught by a neighbour while trying to sneak food into the barn. The insidious neighbour wasted no time in reporting it, prompting an immediate response from the German gendarmes, who proceeded to search the house. Suddenly, the unaware family heard a knock on the door. They did not expect any visitors. The Gestapo forcibly raided the house and searched everything they could but found no trace of the hiding Jews. The gendarmes told their commander about the inspection, but he didn't believe them and took our rescuer to Kežmarok for questioning. There, they began to interrogate him along with other Jews. He was seconds away from death, but he said nothing. He did not mention any of the two young Jews he was hiding, even though the gendarmes tortured him in horrible ways. A few seconds later, as if by chance, his son appeared. He was very pleased. He thought that he was already saved. But the opposite was true, and when his son found out what his father was accused of, he beat his father to a bloody pulp in a fit of rage. Our rescuer (the father) could not explain his son's behaviour, even though he knew he was an anti-Semite. But he believed in his moral upbringing and that he would support him. When he saw that the father could not handle it anymore, he helped him into the car and drove him to the front of the house. Afraid of his mother's reaction, he knocked on the door and then quickly escaped. The wife opened the door and her eyes fell on the beaten and bloodied man who was breathing heavily. She managed to put him to bed and immediately ran to confide in 'her Jews'. Medical care was almost nil, medicines were not accessible to almost anyone, and it was common for people to die of even minor illnesses. By chance, my husband was studying

medicine, so he decided to go to the town and get some help. He dressed up in the clothes of our rescuer and with a little fear, but a lot of determination, he went to the town. By the time he got back, our rescuer was already dead.

At that moment we realized that an innocent person had died because of us. He was the one who took us in, gave us a roof over our heads, gave us a home, and thanks to him we were able to live our lives a little longer. Who knows where we would be now without him or if we would even be here at all. The war and the persecution of the Jews continued for a few more months. The woman continued to protect us and did not blame us for the loss of her husband, because she knew that he had done a good thing. After the war ended, we stayed in touch, and thanks to her, we were able to start a new life. Since none of our family members returned, she became our family, our mother.”

These tragic historical events are mostly associated only with its victims and those who survived the horror. But we should not forget those who dared to stand up against injustice, to risk their lives for innocent Jews. Their actions, courage, fearlessness, and belief in human goodness, along with the universal validity and strength of moral laws, should serve as a model to be remembered and admired. The omnipresent fear, the dehumanised face of man, highlights those who refused to succumb to fear and held onto their humanity... This story, like many others, serves as a reflection of the past that must never be forgotten. As a young generation, we cannot view these events as mere history, for we never know when the past might become a reality again.

In conclusion, I would like to recall and highlight the actions of Bardejov's citizens who have recently been awarded the title "Righteous Among the Nations". Adam Bomba, a policeman and hunter, knew the forests and led many people through them to safety. Štefan Tarcala, a builder, took over Neuman's shop after the Aryanization. He hid his family and unknown Jews in the cellar beneath the Aryanized shop. Jozef Kisel, a postman, had access to letters addressed to the government, which contained the names of those deported to Auschwitz. He warned the Jewish families to evacuate as quickly as possible, and Vasil Kyjovský, who hid Adam Grüsgott for some time.

What about you? Would you take the risk of losing your life and accept strangers into your home? Would you not reveal their names even if you were one step away from death? Remember, the past is very much alive.