

"What would Bardejov look like today if the Second World War had never happened, and the Jewish community still resided alongside us in our town?"

"You can't catch me; you can't catch me..." The noise of children running around echoed throughout the street. The sound penetrated through my room's window, accompanied by the bright rays of the sun which drew me out of my sleep. The voices sounded familiar. They belonged to my classmates Jakob, Sarah, Moritz, and his little sister Nina. We are not going to school today because Pesach is starting. It is one of the most important holidays for us as we commemorate our nation's liberation from slavery in Egypt. Since Easter for Christians starts a few days later, we are the only ones who do not have to go to school today. Parents and teachers always encourage tolerance and to treat everyone as equals. I liked that we did not go to a special school. Jew or not, we are the same people. Yet I noticed that even the smallest details make us different. We Jews always approach our faith with great love and devotion. When we enter a room, we touch the mezuzah on the door frame. We do this to express our respect and to remind ourselves to keep God's Word on our lips and in our hearts. The tefillin, like the Torah scrolls in the mezuzah, are handwritten in a special script. During prayer, we have these words in a leather box fastened on our hands and between our eyes.

I overcame my laziness and got out of the cozy bed. I looked out the window at the street where my friends were playing – we live on the outskirts of town. Our neighbors are not just from the Jewish community – cultural diversity is prevalent here. I think that this is the reason why we create such a peaceful and harmonious environment. We help each other: for example, during Shabbat, our neighbours help us with housework. In return, we offer them our food. I am happy to have grown up here. I ran happily to the kitchen to join my parents. They are my role models. Their marriage is beautiful and devout, and they are like one soul inhabiting two bodies. The family is sacred to the Jews, and one of the precepts we must follow is the mitzvah to have children.

During Pesach, we are not allowed to consume anything fermented, so breakfast was modest. When we finished eating, with a sparkle in my eye, I asked Dad if I could go outside and play. He gave me a stern look but still let me go, under the condition that I would be home by 2 p.m. to help with the preparations for the Seder. As I was leaving our house, my mom yelled at me to watch out for the train – we lived close to the railway tracks. Sometimes I would look out the window at the passing trains, pondering where the passengers were headed. Surely, they must have known where they were going. It would seem rather futile if they were unaware of their destination. After all, the uncertainty of the future can be quite daunting. For some, the unknown is akin to hell.

My friends and I went to the suburbia. On the way, we came across the market square where a few Jewish vendors were selling off their remaining food, drinks, and cosmetics that were not allowed in their homes during Passover. The items were of excellent quality, making it a great bargain to purchase. Most of the shops and craft workshops in the square belonged to Jews. However, some people would simply pass by because they could not let go of their prejudices. As we approached the suburbia, we could spot the tower in the distance, which served as a reservoir

for rainwater used in the Mikveh – the place for ritual baths. The synagogue stood among the surrounding buildings because it was not permitted to build houses of worship in visible places. Nearby was the playground where we used to play. There were not many children at the playground as schools were in session – we just had a day off because of our holiday. While we were playing, we met one of our teachers. We liked him because he always shared fascinating stories with us, and today was no different. He took us on a tour of secret places. Along the way, we encountered various people whom we greeted politely. At the end of the trip, the teacher promised us that next time he would take us to more undiscovered places. I jumped for joy and returned home.

Preparations were in full swing. Mom was baking matzah – the unleavened bread made of flour and water. I started helping Dad prepare the table, which had to be arranged before it got dark. In the middle of the table, we placed a cup of wine, symbolically intended for the prophet Elijah. We also put the Seder plate, matzah, wine, salt water, and of course the Haggadah – a book from which we read during the Seder. The sun was already beginning to set, and we had everything ready. In the beginning, Dad recited the blessing over the wine. After washing our hands, we proceeded to break and eat matzah, and then we shared stories from the Haggadah. Once the feast was over, we said our blessings and ended with traditional songs. Today we had only one more obligation: to go to the synagogue. We put on our coats because it was getting cold outside and met together with Jakob and his parents in the town square. Our parents knew each other very well since our dads worked as doctors, and our moms grew up together from a young age. They were best friends even though she did not come from a Jewish family. However, when she wanted to marry Jakob's father, she converted to Judaism.

Groups of families were already gathering in front of the synagogue. The men made their way into the main men's prayer room while my mother and I entered through the west side. When everyone was seated, the Song of Songs began to be read. After the ceremony, we said goodbye to our friends and had a long drive home. It was already dark outside; the stars were not visible as it was cloudy. Holding my mom's hand, I rubbed my eyes – I was so tired. Mom laughed. "We'll be home in a minute, hang on," and she was right. A few minutes later, we arrived. With my last effort, I went up the stairs to my bedroom. Of course, I did not forget the evening prayer I had with my parents. We wished each other a good night and went to bed. I looked out the window and gazed at the overcast sky as my eyes were slowly closing, and I fell asleep.

Names, voices, and laments shattered the silence of my thoughts and opened my eyes. I was frightened, but my father's arms calmed me. I felt safe around him. I could see the people, the church, and the town hall. Are we in the Town Square? How did I get here? I do not understand. The sky had a reddish tinge, even though the clock showed 10 a.m. "Dad, what is wrong?" I asked in a trembling voice, but he did not answer me. "Mom!" I tried in vain to figure out what was going on. I looked around and recognized people's faces. They all had suitcases in their hands marked with their names. People with stony expressions on their faces were heading towards the train station. Whoever's name was called out received what appeared to be a one-way ticket. Sarah, Moritz, the teacher, everyone was leaving. In the cluster of those names, I heard mine. I did not want to go anywhere; my home was here. "Dad, why do you not tell them we want to stay?" I urged the man who had my dad's body but seemed empty inside. I started to cry and tried to wriggle

out of his arms. I couldn't. As if it was my destiny to leave. After a few steps we were at the train station. In front of me was the same train which I used to see every day from my window. The door opened and I was pushed with the crowd of people into the wagon. I felt cramped, but it was nothing compared to the fear of the unknown. Perhaps this unknown will not be hell. The train moved. Somehow, I made my way through the mass of people to the window to see where we were going. I recognized our house and stared into our windows. In the window of my bedroom, I saw a little girl sitting on the windowsill watching us, watching me. I shuddered. How is that even possible? Who was this mysterious little girl? Was it me? Perhaps I was delirious with fear. Suddenly, I recognized my mom's coat. I could see her stepping out of the wagon, which was slowing down. "Are we already there?" All I cared about was her. As I grabbed her, she pulled me away and I started to fall off the train. I hit the ground, but nothing hurt me. I looked around. There were unfamiliar people, and mud all around. I looked behind me, but the train had long since left. With an accelerated breath and tears in my eyes, I was hopelessly looking for my parents. I only saw people's hands with numbers. How is it possible that people do not have a name but only a number? How can people be reduced to numbers? I screamed at the top of my lungs, but my voice was not coming out. I closed my eyes in despair. Darkness was overtaking my mind, and the sound of the approaching train gradually grew louder. I could feel it getting closer and closer as if it was inside me. Then it honked.

Sweaty, scared, and with moist eyes, I woke up and sat on the bed. I wanted to cry. I ran to the window and saw the train coming into town. It woke me up from my nightmare. Everything was as usual; it was just a scary dream. I snuck into my parents' bedroom to make sure everything was fine. They were in bed, sleeping. Now more relaxed, I returned to my room, tainted by the remnants of a bad dream, and slipped under the covers. I could not fall asleep. Perhaps I did not want to. But one thing I knew for sure was that the dream was not real. People were not wild animals. Hatred did not obscure our minds to the point that we would worry about our lives simply because we were different. After all, could people hate more than love? Could one allow such a thing?

Miriam Helena Hudák, Leonard Stockel High School