Which lessons about the Holocaust and its historical context are the most important for us today?

Throughout history, humanity has grappled with numerous philosophical questions that the mind cannot answer. The most challenging questions revolve around the very existence of humanity. How was life created? Who or what is behind the existence of life? Are we just a random collection of cells or are we pre-defined as the work of an author? What is the meaning of human existence and what are the Creator's intentions for us? We have been pondering these questions for centuries, yet our minds have not been able to provide definitive answers.

As a child, I used to ask my parents similar questions. They were very well-educated. Our family was part of the Jewish community in Bardejov, and as we know, education is an important part of life for Jews. My Mom was a teacher at one of the local schools. She also played the piano beautifully and passed on her art to many of the pupils who came to our house for private piano lessons. I still remember the piercing melodies that came from the living room where she used to give lessons. During the inter-war period, my Dad worked as a doctor, but by Jewish customs and traditions, men were expected to have a craft alongside their education. Therefore, carving became my dad's hobby. He enjoyed carving various wooden toys, bringing joy not only to me and my little sister Sarah but also to other children in our neighbourhood. However, his favourite things to carve were gifts for my Mom. When I was a young boy and asked him why he made so many presents for her, he told me: "With my creations, I express what I cannot convey in words." Even after an hour of contemplating these profound words, I was not able to understand their true meaning. What was it that he could not put into words?

As a family, we lived in peace with all the neighbours and fellow residents of our beautiful quiet town where my parents were highly respected. Dad was known for his selfless and kind attitude towards his patients. He helped nearly everyone in town, whether as a doctor or simply as a neighbour. He had excellent relations with Jews, Christians, and merchants, but he also had great respect for the labourers who worked outside in all kinds of weather. As a teacher, my Mom was highly respected and well-liked, especially for her kind approach to children and their parents. My parents had a tremendous respect for all the residents of the town. Whenever someone stopped us or greeted us on the street, they always emphasized the importance of respectfully returning the greeting. As a child, when I asked why it was so important to greet people on the street, my mother replied: "Dany, by greeting people we are showing respect, we are letting them know that they are meaningful to us." Once again, her words were profound and not easy to understand.

However, the situation in the world began to worsen. Europe gradually caught itself in ever-increasing flames, fuelled by a single man, the man whose name does not deserve to be uttered by my lips. Gradually, news began to spread that war was approaching. That's when I first noticed the concern on my beloved parents' faces, a worry that deepened as the situation deteriorated. The news of Slovakia joining the German attack on Poland in September 1939 brought tears to my mother's eyes because her sister Rachel lived there. When I asked Dad why Mom was crying so much, he did not say anything, but the sad expression on his face foreshadowed what was to come.

The state, of which we were legitimate citizens, suddenly began to launch severe repressions against us Jews. At first, we were ordered to wear a yellow Star of David stitched onto our clothing, a visible means of distinguishing us from the "non-Jews." As if people were no longer equal. We never understood the necessity of wearing this star, and many of us still don't. The repressions by the state continued and intensified. Suddenly, Jews were prohibited from using public transport. They were also forbidden from driving Slovak motor vehicles, voting, holding public office, or working as engineers, notaries, or lawyers. Moreover, they were prohibited from gathering. The list of restrictions seemed endless, and it weighed heavily on the Jewish community. My parents were forbidden to work in their professions, and Sarah and I were banned from attending a traditional school and even meeting our non-Jewish friends. A little later came the process of Aryanization - the confiscation of property for the benefit of the state. We lost almost everything. I still remember how my mother cried when they took the piano from our apartment, the piano on which she played tunes I loved. These were tunes I never heard again. My Dad had all his carving tools taken away from him, without which he could never carve anything again.

While sitting with my beloved family in the ghetto uncertainly waiting, I asked myself: "Is human life worth anything at all?" Then, all of a sudden someone said: "500 Reichsmarks." Only today, after all this time, I know what this magic number meant. It was the amount that the Slovak state paid to Germany for one deported Jew. That's 3,000 euros for a living being whose life was irreplaceable. Was that the value of a human life? Were people's value really assessed as a head of cattle, considering that individuals were being sent to the "slaughterhouse" in hideous cattle wagons for this ridiculous sum? Upon arrival at the camps, the Jews were stripped of everything they had left: their jewellery, clothes, hair, and finally, their names. They were no longer seen as people; they were walking corpses, numbered, and slaughtered like cattle every day. At this point, the value of human life did not only decline, it was extinguished.

Sarah and I were the lucky ones; our Dad hid us under the straw that was used for sleeping in the ghetto. At the time I did not know where they were going, or why I could not go with them, but after mom's kiss, I realized I wouldn't see her, nor my Dad.

Many years have passed since then, and many things have changed. States have been created, like the Jewish state of Israel, or disappeared, like the Soviet Union. Political systems have changed, science and technology have advanced, and the general standard of living has risen. And the people? Unfortunately, in many ways, they have not changed since then. They have forgotten this dark period of our history, the atrocities committed daily not only in the camps but also on the streets of our beautiful Bardejov. Memories of this period are slowly fading with the last survivors. Only a few stories remain recorded, serving as a warning of how inhumanly people can treat one another and the atrocities they are capable of committing. What about people today, do they even realize it? Have we finally started to appreciate each other? And finally, have we begun to value life itself? With tears in my eyes, I have to say no. Once again, people are pitting themselves against each other, highlighting their differences, condemning, and even speaking out against each other. One is bothered by the fact that some people are of a different skin colour, sexual orientation, political opinion, or religion. It bothers them when they see "that" Jew again, a person who has property and is well off. My Dad told us many times: "People change over time, but hatred, envy,

and greed last forever." All my life I have been asking: "How is it possible that despite all the historical experiences, facts, and knowledge we have today, we are still unable to realize the value of human life?" Every armed conflict since then has only focused on potential benefits, treating losses as mere numbers on a table.

Even after all this time, humanity still tends to resort to various forms of extremism. People are spreading hateful statements against minorities, openly endorsing extremist leaders, and, unfortunately, resorting to violence in many cases. Why? Was there not enough hatred and injustice in the past?

How much longer are we going to look at all those wasted human lives slip through our fingers as inevitable casualties? As mere numbers on a table of casualties? Can we ever learn from these historical experiences? Can we not realize that, despite our different biological traits, our different political, and sexual orientations, or religious beliefs, we are all the same? Are we unable to rise above our differences and act humanely towards others, respecting, helping, and, above all, allowing them to live? Where does so much hatred come from? Why do we have to hate a person just because he or she is different? Is there darkness within us that fuels hatred, or has it always been like that?

Each person must search for the answer within themselves.

We are all flesh and blood; we all need to eat and drink, and we all need love and understanding to exist. When are we finally going to realize the fact that every life is unique and irreplaceable? When are we going to put the lives of others above our interests? Too many questions and no answers. Unfortunately, no one has dared to answer these questions until today. No one dares to guess when there will be enough evil in the world.

Despite the clear reminders of the Holocaust through memorials, museums, and open-air exhibits, its legacy is often overlooked. The Holocaust is perceived more as a distant past that already happened and cannot be repeated. Unfortunately, this statement is reinforced by the fact that we are indifferent to our history. A nation that does not know its past is destined to relive it, so it is our responsibility to learn from it before experiencing its consequences firsthand.

What is the true worth of human life? It is infinite, priceless, and immeasurable by any standard that humanity can conceive. Every life is unique and irreplaceable, this is how it has always been and always will be. It is up to us to finally realize this immutable fact and learn from the past.

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