

Commemorating Education

Almost a year and a half ago, one afternoon I went to suburbia, where I had a meeting arranged by our professor Lešková with her friend. I had no idea what was waiting for me, what it would be like, what we would talk about. The meeting was very pleasant, especially in a place that is connected with the life of the Jewish community. How significant. An elderly gentleman was waiting for us with a smile on his face and a kind look. "Hello Zuzka, it's you, I'm glad you found the time and willingness to listen to me. What I am going to tell you is the story of many whose lives were invaded by war and broke the thread of happiness and joy. It is also the story of many places where more or less numerous Jewish communities lived, which followed their traditions. Today, only the buildings left behind are evidence of their existence. And that's why our meeting, in this very place. There is a spirit of a forgotten time present that will speak through my mouth. And so I let myself drift into the past.

I met a person who changed my perspective not only on history, but also on people themselves, just like me and you. Long conversations with Mr. Štefan, who is the child of survivors of the Nazi terror, revealed to me the past of extraordinary Jews from two different corners of the world and left a deep mark on my soul. I mean that in a good way, even though after each conversation I felt anxious and maybe even guilty. As a young person, I did not feel this regime on my skin. As a young person, I can't even imagine what it's like. However, as a young person, I know what needs to be done to prevent this cruel and bloody history from happening again. Mr. Štefan reminded me of this when he was describing his meeting from school after 10 years: "Years later, my classmates invited me to a post-graduation meeting. I froze when I read the invitation. Should I go? I suddenly found myself on a ski trip locked in the bathroom with my Jewish classmates. They shined flashlights in our eyes, Jews roared at us and wanted to let us go. I had to process that feeling for a long time, my inner fear, the anger of my parents, who hid from this in barns and woods. I was about 16 at the time. And today came an invitation to a meeting from those who caused this to me then. I'm ashamed that I couldn't do it, I couldn't come there and look them straight in the face.

Being brave is not easy. After some time, I recorded a video and sent it to them. I talked about the feelings that I had rooted in me and I must admit, I was relieved..." He described the moment when he blamed himself for the ruthlessness and intolerance of others. I realized that the kids on the ski trip were my age. But what scared me even more was the fact that, just like

then and today, this situation could easily happen. You can't even imagine how easy it is. The evil could not be eradicated. We should remember that he is only waiting for the right opportunity.

However, I cannot point a finger at where the seed of hatred and intolerance is sown in the hearts of young people. I don't know why it should be, since we should have learned from a past that none of us should be proud of. And yet they can be found. Whether on social networks, in parliament or directly in the Middle East, we encounter an increase in extremism, anti-Semitism, and nationalism. However, I am again addressing the young. Shouldn't we set an example to others, older ones, that something like this has no place in our future society? Why isn't it?

We also dealt with this question in sociology class, where we tried to get to the root of the problem. It is unnecessary to describe different opinions or views, but we agreed on a definite conclusion. There will never be enough education on the topic of the Holocaust or war as such. Just as fire is an element, so is extremism. However, social experiments show the exact opposite. We're even more into it than we thought. Perhaps this is also due to the years of Covid, when the curriculum of the 2nd World War was adopted and the key information was lost somewhere between the teacher and the student on the other side of the Zoom platform. We agreed that none of us received a full interpretation of what people had to experience during the functioning of the Slovak state or, in general, during the occupation by Nazi Germany.

Well, nobody, not even us, can argue about the pandemic, lack of time or information, and certainly not about the fact that we are young. We are a generation that should be able to realize that for those who do not learn from history, they will be forced to relive it. And currently we see it in Ukraine, but also in the Middle East. October 7, 2024 became a modern holocaust for Jews. Israel as a state was not created because of the Holocaust, but the Holocaust was created because the Jews did not have their own state. Hatred, anti-Semitism, extremism and everything they fought against are starting to creep back into the world. Have we really not learned our lesson yet?

Let's not close our eyes. If we keep the flame of hatred even smoldering, we never know when it will grow into a devastating conflagration consuming hundreds, thousands or perhaps millions of innocent lives. It is only a matter of time which of the groups will become the "unsuitable", "dangerous" one, but in reality it will be just different in someone's eyes. And

there is nothing wrong with that. Otherness should not be a reason for division, but for connection. There is strength only in diversity.

Stories of heroism show us that ultimately what is important is not what we do for ourselves, but what we have (not) done for others. A well-known Jewish proverb says that whoever saves one human life is like saving the whole world. We too, as the third generation starting with those who survived the Holocaust, their children and now us, have a chance for peace. We have a chance to be heroes and defeat the smoldering threat. But where did hatred have to go for us to consider the effort to survive as heroism? Will enlightenment and education be the only thing that will teach my generation?

It is our mission to spread the heard message further, to educate not only ourselves, but also others. After a large Jewish community, which one day disappeared not by its own will, but by the decisions of others, today only empty buildings and spaces remain. As we walked through the buildings, I must admit, I had a strange feeling, a feeling of heaviness. I felt the gazes of the people once gathered here, saw the newly discovered inscriptions on the walls that they left behind.

To spread the message, the renovated synagogue and the assembly house are a suitable place, they are the bearer of the spiritual legacy, the values so necessary for a tolerant society. Tikkun alam is a term in Judaism that refers to various forms of action designed to repair and improve the world. to maintain social order. Education and commemoration, either in the form of reverent memories or through other activities and events in the area of the Jewish Memorial in Bardejov, which was unveiled in 2014, is one of the most important parts of spreading awareness about the Holocaust and its effects, even among us, although we do not perceive it that way. The 10th anniversary of this memorial proves that it does make sense after all. It makes sense to fight for a better future, with an emphasis on the past. Even quiet buildings that were once the center of spiritual and social life can tell us a lot. We just have to listen carefully.

Zuzana Hijová , L. Stockela High
School