

The mute witness

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This is a story about not-so-great people living in a GREAT town.

Every great story starts with one word. This story begins with multiple words – help us, have mercy, at least on the children. It all started with the plea of helpless, defenseless men on one side, and the power of the law that stood against them on the other. A battle of words, a battle of conscience, of the heart, of courage against hypocrisy, fear, and hatred. It is a struggle for faith in humanity, in its purpose, faith in its goodness, in what we call the power of humanity.

“Humanity” is a miraculous and powerful word. The life within us compels the walls of the fleshy heart to beat against each other, ensuring that the sludge from the outside does not clog the veins and blood vessels. It allows the chest to expand freely and with every breath, it shakes the dust from our soul. It moves our body, destiny, and the entire world. Its strength is revealed even in history's darkest moments, demanding exceptional bravery.

It hides in the gentle waves of the Topľa river. There is enough of it for everyone, you need to stop occasionally within the incessant noise of the town and take a pinch of it in your hands. The whirlwind carries it through Bardejov's forests, roads, streets, and houses, and directly to the majesty in our town's heart. Its glow and size have been rising up towards the sky for many years. The pulse of this living yet silent building resonates across the globe, drawing many to be in its presence. Many people look at it and do not even recognize that they too are being watched. And one day, they will be condemned or rewarded.

They do not realize that the windows of our town's cathedral are like eyes – eyes that see everything. They have seen it all.

The big town welcomed everyone with open arms – Christians, Jews, Slovaks, Ruthenians, and Roma. No matter to whom the dwellings belonged. The roots of flowers, trees, and blades of grass grew from one yard to another, and flourished fearlessly and sincerely, just like friendships between people.

However, not everyone has embraced humanity with open arms. Someone came who held his hands tightly clenched in a fist. Someone who had only one intention. Someone who wanted

to make this world his own. He unleashed a storm that swept across the world and through our town. The thunder was replaced by the rumble of cannons, the flash of gunpowder, and crimson drops of blood falling from the dark clouds to the ground. He offered an umbrella only to some. However, he did not allow anyone to carry humanity in their grasp.

The cathedral's eyes witnessed everything. If they could have closed them, they would have. If they could cry, they would shed tears. But they could not. They were only able to stare silently.

Human eyes have seen everything. But they can close their eyes and hide in darkness. Many have closed them, at least only for a few moments. But many kept them open.

Some did not prevent their eyes from seeing the truth and kept their gaze fixed where needed. Although tears sometimes clouded their vision, their hearts urged them to act.

They saw a man. He was not tall, but he was burly, and he was walking down the street. He was wearing heavy and sturdy shoes and a grey-green uniform. His dark hair was hidden under a cap bearing the symbol of our country. The lights of the lamps reflected the glow of the metals that gleamed proudly on his broad chest – a servant, a keeper of order. In weal and woe. He served our town in the sunshine and not even a storm stopped him. Despite having to switch to a bulkier, rain-resistant coat, it provided him the cover to conceal his humanity beneath the hood.

He was protecting those who were unjustly hurt. He was helping when the train took the Creator's creations to the place of no return. He opened cursed wagons and offered freedom to innocent souls.

Those were dark times. Filled with nothing but bad news, fear, despair, envy, and hatred tucked away in sealed envelopes. They came every day, flying back and forth between Bratislava and Bardejov. Not even the eyes of the cathedral could see what they were hiding. But they knew of someone who could. Someone who left his house at sunrise delivered all the letters throughout the day and returned at sunset. The leather satchel full of names was too heavy. But the humanity he had held in his heart all his life gave him the strength to bear the weight on his shoulders during the challenging mornings. It lightened the satchel and quickened his steps. The delivery of the letters had an important task: to warn. To save a life and to listen to the voice of conscience.

Where can a man seek refuge when pursued like a wild animal? Marked with a yellow star, he is but as a flower that withers. He is a nobody. He is guilty only of being a Jew.

The breeze that flew through us opened the barn door, the attic, and the cellar. The sacrifices of the rescuers reached even the border of our homeland. They guided the rescued through the dense darkness to safety. Despite living in the darkness for days, weeks, and months, it did not consume them. The hope that they would feel the warmth of the sun and gaze upon the azure sky stayed with them until the very end. They believed that the storm would eventually pass.

The colorful eyes of the basilica witnessed all the heroics. They reflected the glory of these deeds, but they could not share them with the world. They watched silently and will forever hold this story in memory – the story about GREAT people and their humanity in the not-so-great town.

The storm has passed. The sun came out again, scaring away the terrors. More than 70 years have passed... And the eyes of majesty are still watching. They saw those who left the comfort of their homes and stepped out into the chilly March air, driven by the desire to make Slovakia a better place. They witnessed the fire in people's hearts that lit the candles. The flickering flames symbolized a thirst for change and a hunger for a just future for everyone.

Why do people always desire to change the world according to their ideas? Why do they yearn so much for power, wealth, and fame? Why do those who oppose their ideals end up dead?

Those who refused to stand idly by were the ones who died. Those who pursued the truth confronted the lies and fought against the evil spreading through our town. They fought everything that killed humanity and summoned storms. Their testimonies served as a reflection of the contemporary world.

Let us step out again. The direction we take, the choices we make, and the heights we reach are all within our control. The cathedral will age, but its watchful gaze will always remain upon us. Its ability to observe will never diminish. Regardless of our distance, the buildings will always observe the truthfulness of our world, the sincerity of our actions, and the journey we take.

...let us embrace humanity with open arms.