

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

A town has many eyes. Houses, churches, and synagogues are all looking through them... they are all the same – mute, silent, and glassy. Only we, the people who live in houses, and go to churches and synagogues, are different. But we all look at the world with our own eyes. We observe houses, churches, and synagogues and admire them as they transform over time. And the eyes of the houses observe how we behave in a changing world.

Only the oldest houses in our town remember when it was divided into two worlds: one of houses and churches within the town walls, and another hidden beyond them. Yet, life also thrived beyond the town walls, in the Jewish Suburbia – a world unwelcomed within the town. This world had to wait outside until we, the people on the other side of the walls, broke the barriers of prejudice and let it in. And so, among the existing houses, new ones were built, each adorned with small wooden boxes on the door frames called mezuzahs. New synagogues were also built between the churches.

These two worlds merged to create one big town – a town for Slovaks, Jews, Ruthenians, and Roma. I and hundreds of my peers – Jews, Slovaks, Ruthenians, and Roma – were born and raised in this quiet town. Its bustling streets were filled with dignified students and gentlemen with hats and sideburns. Some attended churches on Sundays, while others went to synagogues on Saturdays.

In the town there were new voices and music that arrived from the Jewish Suburbia. The town which was enveloped by mysterious prayers every day like the morning mist. Slow, drawn-out melodies sung in the mysterious language of the patriarchs. These ancient melodies were sung by the Jewish people as they walked through the center of the Red Sea. The psalms they sang on their way up to Jerusalem, and which even today accompany their journey through the streets of Bardejov. Their joyful Hassidic songs also depicted a challenging life under the watchful eye of a benevolent God, who continued to protect the Jewish, Slovak, Ruthenian, and Roma people.

The town changed throughout the day and was full of people, rushing to work, to the shops, to school. In the mornings, the sidewalks were full of men. Those wearing kippahs walked to the

synagogues to pray before they went to work like the others. Some children walked the same path to pray with their fathers in the synagogues. The sidewalks were filled with people trying to catch up with their day. In the evenings, as people returned home, the houses lit up their glassy eyes glowing with warmth. People disappeared behind the curtains and sat down at the table. In all the windows people appreciated each other. In some, there was a flicker of a seven-branched menorah, or an eight-branched Hanukkah menorah, while in others, there were four Advent candles.

By the time night dimmed all the lights in the windows, the cold days were replaced by spring. But people were still sitting down at the tables. At that time of the year, during the holiday of Passover, some remembered how long ago their fathers famously came out of Egypt. Others celebrated the holiday of Easter and thought of how their Lord rose from the dead.

When the new year of wishes, repentance, and resolutions began, people got up from their desks and came out of their houses – marking the beginning of Yom Kippur (the day of Atonement). It is a holiday when people pray for forgiveness of their sins and during which people should reconcile with each other, but especially make peace with the Almighty.

Every day, every year, many eyes walk in our town. Human eyes that live next to each other in the same town. Some are brown, others blue, green, or grey. Some are big, some are small. Yet they differ not only in color... but also in sight. Each of them looks at the world differently.

Our town has many eyes. They look equally at Slovaks, Jews, Ruthenians and Roma. They observe how we navigate in the changing world. And whether we preserve the place of churches and synagogues, vibrant with diverse music, and ideas, where people walk together to pray. They also look at whether we can protect our town from those who dislike people with different customs, traditions, and viewpoints.

Let us ensure that fear does not silence us and prevent us from speaking up when someone attempts to suppress those with differing viewpoints. Let us be careful that fear does not tie our hands when the hands of others push out people who are different. Let us stay aware so fear does not stop us from noticing when someone tries to exclude those with different viewpoints from our town. Shall we fear those who spread hatred in our town and forget the God who has protected his people for centuries? Will we have the courage to watch silently as someone touches God's eye?

Bardejov has many glassy eyes. Even if we choose to turn a blind eye to what unfolds in our town, the eyes of houses continue to remain open. They will always remember that we closed our eyes and expelled people with different viewpoints outside the town walls.

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