

The lesson of the Holocaust for today's world

"The Holocaust did not start with Jews being loaded onto trains; it started the moment a Jew was slapped without consequence. From there, things only escalated. What we refer to as the Holocaust – Auschwitz and so on – was merely the final chapter. The real lesson for us is the importance of standing up against that initial act of aggression." concludes Alexander Bachner.

I will follow up on his words. The issue of the Holocaust is a European trauma, and therefore, also a part of 20th century Slovak history. However, it is important to remember that the Holocaust was not only a tragedy for the victims but also a tragedy for all those who were involved. Nowadays, we live in a chaotic period of intolerance and hatred, where people kill each other simply because of a different nationality, origin, religion, or simply because of a different opinion. Understanding the causes, course, and consequences of the Holocaust carries an urgent message. I would say that one of the most intriguing aspects of the Holocaust is the realization that, until the mid-1970s, the term "Holocaust" was unfamiliar to most Austrians. Astonishingly, even the undeniable involvement of Austria and many of its residents in the Holocaust failed to open the eyes of many. Austria was not ready to confront the historical reality of the Holocaust, let alone admit its involvement. In contrast to Germany, where military tribunals also indicted concentration camp guards, Austria took a different approach. By 1949, many former Austrian NSDAP members were accepted into public and political institutions. This acceptance contributed to a growing trend of Holocaust denial in Austria. The period from 1938 to 1945 disappeared from the consciousness of the Austrian public – it was not mentioned in the media, schools, or parliament.

It took 40 years for Austria's political leaders to change their attitudes. This shift signaled a gradual change in the public, who initially showed great reluctance to accept responsibility for the events connected with the deportation and extermination of the Jews.

Simon Wiesenthal was one of the key figures in breaking the silence about Austria's involvement in the Holocaust. He was persecuted by the Nazis due to his Jewish heritage and managed to survive imprisonment in several German concentration camps. After the war, he devoted his entire life to persecuting Nazi criminals and perpetrators of the Holocaust. *"When the Germans first came to Halych, half of the population was Jewish: one hundred and fifty thousand Jews. When the Germans left, only five thousand of them remained... I often reminded myself that everything in our lives happened for a reason, so the fact that I survived must have some meaning. Mine has always been that as long as I live, I must represent those who did not survive."* he said. That is why he became an advocate for the 6 million Jewish victims of Nazism and assisted in capturing over a thousand war criminals. You might ask why I bring up Austria when I am Slovak. First, we must remember that the Holocaust cannot be viewed in isolation. These events are not defined merely by national borders. The Holocaust is a worldwide problem! It is a historical and moral problem that goes beyond the past; it is relevant in the present as well! The second reason is the realization that it has taken Austria so long to acknowledge this undeniable historical fact. The Holocaust was the only case where war was declared for racial reasons and not against a neighboring nation or state, or for economic, strategic, or political reasons. Why? I think one point

should be clear to us. It was a planned radical revolution, a revolt against everything that existed before then.

Slovakia, which at that time was under the influence of the former USSR, was no better off. Even today, more than 70 years later, it is surprising that many Slovaks still maintain a similar attitude to that of Austria during the 50s. Despite the abundance of historical knowledge available, some still refuse to face and accept certain aspects of the past. Let us look together at the latest results of a survey by the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights. A shocking 28% of respondents with primary education and 10% of respondents with higher education do not want a Jew as their neighbor. The following numbers provide clear and unmistakable evidence that anti-Semitism is unfortunately still prevalent in Slovakia.

This raises a question that we should all reflect on: Has history taught us anything? People rarely learn from history, and the history of the Nazi regime is no exception. In school, we are taught about generals, politicians, and philosophers... But we avoid learning about the dark sides of history – the mass murders, the agonies, the sufferings that scream in our faces throughout history. We still fail to grasp the fact that we will never be able to curb the tendency to destroy each other if we refuse to talk about it. Let us realize one sad fact: Human beings are the only creatures on the whole Earth that are capable of destroying themselves.

The fact that so little time is devoted to the Holocaust in schools has resulted in young people not understanding it at all and not being able to look at the events associated with genocide with sound judgment. In some schools, it is a dead memory that comes to life once a year in history classes. The lack of historical awareness among the youth contributed to the fact that the 2016 parliamentary elections were won by a party whose views are closely linked to those of representatives of the Slovak state during the Second World War. To be objective, however, we must remember that Slovakia was then a "vassal" of Nazi Germany. There was no such thing as freedom or decision-making in politics.

There is no doubt that the 70 years from which testimonies and survivor's memories have been preserved are long gone. But the Holocaust is not a closed historical chapter! Understanding this tragedy is also important because today we face similar threats, such as the rise of ethnic tensions or the radicalization of the political scene. It is important to raise awareness of racial and ethnic intolerance among young people through educational activities. Because even today there are groups of people who are inspired by this period and are trying to bring it back.

To understand why the Second World War and the genocide took place, we must ask how it is possible that Adolf Hitler received such massive support. Let's take a brief look at the events in the history of Germany. Do you not see any parallels with the present day? In the 1928 elections, the NSDAP won 12 seats, in 1930 it was already 107, and in 1933 it was 288, which was 34% of the total. This, too, is perhaps a reminder of the present. What caused such a rise? The same thing that is exploiting such parties today!

We remember the chaos of the Weimar Republic and Germany's burden of heavy war reparations. On top of that, there had been a major economic crisis – The Great Depression. The economic and political chaos in Germany during the early 1930s allowed Hitler to gain power. He

promised to stop unemployment and put everything in order. His idea was to restore order to the country that was in pure chaos. The former parties could have stepped in and formed a coalition, but unfortunately, the Social Democrats and the Communists did not agree to form a government. Hitler then got rid of his political opponents, followed by the consolidation of power through the creation of the SS. This is why some people today may have such a subconscious fear of transit police or militias protecting our borders. Because all of this can escalate into nonsense that had its basis in Germany.

I share the Government's view that it is necessary to raise students' awareness. I also support all activities aimed at eliminating extremism, racism, anti-Semitism, and hate speech, such as the compulsory visit to Auschwitz arranged by the school. However, it is important to remember that Slovakia also has a dark past in this regard, in the form of concentration camps and Jewish labour camps, as the one in Sered'. I am convinced that raising awareness of this issue can influence the mindset of today's youth. I hope that the demand for educational activities will continue to grow, especially to prevent the spread of extremism in Slovakia. This is crucial not only for society but also for the safety and well-being of people.

This brings me to my next question: How could right-wing extremism or modern fascism emerge from a region that was once the heart of anti-fascist resistance and gained support even in villages devastated by fascists? I believe the core issue lies in the failure of young people, in particular, to connect the events that happened 70 years ago with the political party currently holding seats in parliament. Young people often argue that this assertion is entirely untrue and that the party in question merely seeks to restore order. Wrong! This is absolutely a fundamental element of fascist ideology – to restore order. The pursuit of order continues endlessly. It is an ongoing battle – a fight against everything!

If we want to prevent a similar scenario, which we are slowly but surely heading towards, we need to change our mindset. In particular, we must finally start talking about the events associated with the Holocaust. We cannot remain silent and pretend that nothing happened or think that it is just history that has no impact on the present. As Erich Kästner said, *"The past must speak, and we must listen. Before that, we and it will not rest."* The events of the Second World War, particularly the genocide of the Jews, should serve as a warning that such atrocities could occur again at any moment.

A man who has been hurt seeks to get rid of the memory to not renew the pain. A man who has hurt pushes the memory as far down as possible to free himself from it, to weaken his sense of guilt. No one can put themselves in the shoes of those who had to suffer so much. These people suffered because they were of a different nationality and a different religion, but they did nothing wrong, they did not harm anyone. The words of the Austrian philosopher Jean Améry resonate deeply: *"Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained."* I must say again, with sadness, that injustice cannot be removed – it persists over time. Let us find a pinch of courage! Let us not be cowards and try to look the truth straight in the eye. It cannot be denied that these events are tragic;

the fate of the Jews is more than sad. However, if we look at these dark moments objectively, we will see that they simply cannot be forgotten. Only those who suffered can forgive. But our task is to Never Forget.

We should all take Simon Wiesenthal's words to heart: *"When I die and go to heaven, I will meet the victims of the Holocaust. They'll share the stories from their time on Earth. And when they ask about my story, I will tell them: I have always remembered you."* I believe we are transitioning into a new era, where we are distancing ourselves from past events. As time passes, the significance of the Holocaust diminishes. We should bear in mind that Holocaust deniers will not disappear despite the advancement of technology, the internet, and other media. On the contrary, their efforts to erase and deny history will become even easier. To keep such incidents from happening in the future, it is important to preserve the memory of the victims and the events and to educate future generations about it. Because the memory of history is eternal, and there is no escape from memories. That's how it should be. Auschwitz – the place where millions died – deserves not to be forgotten. Embracing the truth of our history, with both its positive and negative aspects, should be a fundamental part of everyone's mindset. People must not be indifferent to neo-Nazism, intolerance, extremism, and anti-Semitism, whether in Slovakia or anywhere else in the world. It is equally important to understand how the past influences the present and take steps to secure our future. History can offer valuable insights into the challenges of the present day. We can either learn from it or repeat its mistakes – it is up to us.

In conclusion, I would like to share the words of Miroslav Ivanov, which I believe will resonate with everyone and guide us throughout our lives: *"It is not necessary to love the past, it is enough to acknowledge it and remember that it ends in the future."*

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