

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

The Holocaust did happen. The total number of victims is estimated at more than 10 million. Jews, Roma, the handicapped, and people who disagreed with fascism. Children. Millions left defenseless, humiliated, dehumanized, and deprived of basic human rights. It is more than just a number or statistic; it represents the individual fates of people, and entire families who each had their own lives and stories.

More than 70,000 Jews were deported from the Slovak state, which was supposed to take care of its citizens and protect them. They were deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp, where fewer than 400 survived. They crammed them into "cattle trucks" and headed into the unknown. Today, we know that the destinations for many were the extermination camps in Poland: Chelmno, Belzec, Treblinka, and Majdanek. One man condemned another to death, transforming himself into a beast behind the mask of humanity.

Many of us have forgotten this tragic part of history marked by murder. Why? Was it not tragic enough, not deterrent enough? Are we missing the first-hand experience? Have we grown weary of freedom, of our humanity? Is there good or evil in man? These questions trouble our consciousness and conscience. Is it the individual guilt of someone consumed by hatred, or the collective guilt of a society unable to recognize the thin line of danger between racism and genocide? The danger does not start with deeds themselves, but with words, and thoughts. Is it the fault of democracy and freedom, or of the mentality of people to be manipulated and controlled? Evil were the intentions, the attitudes, and the consequences. The evil, inexplicable actions of Hitler and his followers were gradually spreading like a smoldering plague. And so, in our minds, a silent warning should echo: "Remember – Zachor," "Never again."

Despite the facts we know that are taught in schools to children, there are still some who question the Holocaust. They attack survivors, call their stories fairy tales, and even question their testimonies. They march proudly, sometimes even arrogantly, wearing Guards uniforms, heavy coats, tattooed swastikas, and promoting other hateful symbols, such as the number 1488, 88... What is even more disturbing is that they are based in the National Council of the Slovak Republic and have proposed that NGO workers should wear visible markings on their clothing. It is sad that

so many young people, lawyers, teachers, and workers, believe that these fascist MPs could ever lead our country responsibly, democratically, maturely, and better. In their policy statement, they initially proudly proclaimed the ideas of the Slovak People's Party. Their mindset is marked by demagoguery, emphasizing differences between people, thus contributing to the polarisation of society and the radicalization of sentiments. Is the legacy of the Holocaust not strong enough for these people?

Let's take a step back in history for a moment. In November 1938, around 7,500 Jews were forcibly deported to the territory of "No man's land", on the Slovak-Hungarian border. They were left there to fend for themselves in terrible conditions. Despite everything, many still placed their trust in the state. Gradually, the Jewish inhabitants began to see salvation in emigration from Slovakia or in conversion to the Christian faith. After the establishment of the Slovak state, the situation began to escalate, and the government started to issue anti-Jewish regulations. The number of Jews in some professions was limited, and the process of Aryanization – the transfer of Jewish property to non-Jewish owners or its complete liquidation – began. The Jews became an economic and social problem that had to be solved. They were stripped of their basic human rights and freedoms. They could not drive motor vehicles or visit parks, swimming pools, cinemas, libraries, markets, and theatres. Gradually, they were forbidden to attend school or were subjected to constant harassment in the form of house searches. It became mandatory to visibly mark clothing with a yellow armband, later with a yellow six-pointed Star of David. A star that shines in the night sky, but this one burned on their chests, marking them as targets of hate. All of this marked the beginning of preparations for deportation. From the 25th of March to the 20th of October 1942, deportations were carried out from Slovakia to concentration camps in the territory of today's Poland. They were transported in inhuman conditions in freight wagons with no water or food. Diseases were spreading, and people were dying. Most of them did not survive the concentration camps and perished in the gas chambers. Thanks to the help of the locals, who risked their lives and resisted the anti-Jewish propaganda, some were saved. Why did all this happen? People believed the manipulator, the murderer's vision of a better life or job opportunities. The Shoah (meaning "destruction" or "doom" in Hebrew) is responsible for claiming many lives that were not responsible for their fate. They were thrown into the waters of hatred from which they could not save themselves. Do you see a parallel between the past and present? They say that there is no greater teacher than history itself. But in many cases today it seems that the past is our present.

Why is it important to talk about the Holocaust? Holocaust education highlights the consequences of racism, anti-Semitism, and stereotyping in any society. Even today, we are confronted with extremist sentiments and ideas, and we must reject them. There are many manifestations of extremism in our society, which is why it is important to talk about the Holocaust. In a few years, there will be no one left to share their personal experiences from the camps they endured. All we have left are hundreds of pieces of evidence, books, and testimonies of these people. Young people are the driving force in society. They must develop critical thinking skills to distinguish truth from falsehood. To share with the world the atrocities that occurred, to spread the message, and to ensure we never forget the depths of human suffering. We are all equal, regardless of differences in skin color, religion, or origin; we all have the same rights. No one should face discrimination. People are born and raised in diverse social environments, families, and communities with different social statuses and levels of education. Additionally, they are characterized by having different abilities, knowledge, skills, and talents. The tragic fate of millions of Jews in Europe, including Slovakia, must never fade from our memory. It serves as a constant reminder of the depths to which totalitarian ideology and human hatred can sink.

Extremism is a word we have come across a lot lately. When people think of extremism, various images come to mind: violence and aggression, intolerance and hatred towards those perceived as different, racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and belief in the superiority of the white race. Another common association is the 'People's Party Our Slovakia' and its leader, Marián Kotleba, who, according to 12% of respondents in a recent Denník N survey, embodies today's extremism in Slovakia. Some people associate extremism with fascism, Nazism, and the horrors of the Second World War. Shaved heads, hailing, guardsmen's boots, uniforms, swastikas, etc. In Slovakia, we also come across opinions that describe extremism as a sort of neutral phenomenon, a common deviation from the norm, non-standard behavior, a 'deviation from the line,' which is not considered dangerous. It is because of these views that evil can thrive and lead us back to an unwanted past. The shadows of our history are catching up. Humanity carries the traumas of unresolved pasts, like membership in the Hlinka Guard and Aryanization.

In the 21st century, as we continue to evolve and perceive life more deeply, we are realizing that anti-Semitism, fascism, and Nazism haven't disappeared. They are here, among us. It is extremely important to remember the greatest horror in the world. It is important to discuss the

Jewish experience and recognize that it is a part of humanity's collective history, even though it was largely the Jews who bore the brunt of it. We must not remain silent about what Jews and humanity endured during the Holocaust. It is not a distant history; it is a history we are still living through. We have already been silent once, and that tragic mistake cost the lives of millions of children, men, and women. Let us never again experience such a long, painful, and sorrowful silence.

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