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### **Jewish monuments in Bardejov**

What is a nation without monuments, the tangible reminders of its existence? Are they the essence of a people's culture and sentiments, or merely something that eventually turns into ruins and dust?

Mobilization, war, Hitler – these were not just ordinary words, they sounded repulsive, and they gradually brought fear, indignation, and tears to my eyes. These words were not just facts; each mention carried a wave of terror.

When the Second World War reached Bardejov in September 1939, schools were turned into military hospitals. The once cheerful town square full of smiling faces, was overrun by marching soldiers, spreading tension and panic. The only way to survive was to trade the comforts of home for a weapon and go into battle. Men were called to the frontline, leaving their families behind to march into Poland and later Russia. The panic intensified, and the suffering persisted. The people witnessed a dangerous and corrupt lust for power that grew unchecked. How can a nation blindly follow a leader who commands the destruction of other ethnic groups?

The Jewish community in Bardejov, representing one of the most endangered nations at the time, endured the agonizing sight of their nation's suffering. They watched helplessly as everything they had built up over the years – wealth accumulated over generations – was forcibly taken from them. It is astonishing how quickly basic human rights ceased to be respected and were replaced by hatred, greed, and prejudice.

A year into the war, mass deportations of Jews to labor camps began, leading to slow and cruel exhaustion, starvation, and death. In Bardejov, a plan was set in motion to eradicate one of the oldest religions in the world. It started with the liquidation of their properties and shops and culminated in the deportation of over 3,700 people to the death camps. Saturday prayers at the synagogue were replaced by gatherings of families and relatives, praying for the chance to see another day. Young people began to hide and tried to flee to Hungary. The peaceful atmosphere in the city was replaced by envy, distrust, and betrayal. The places that had recently bustled with

the religious and social life of the Jewish residents were suddenly deserted. The voices praying to God in the synagogues became silent. Neighbors disappeared... Only mute witnesses remained in the form of the buildings that today encompass the heart of the Jewish Suburbia. As the last traces of the German troops vanished and the Soviet armies liberated Poland, hope began to flourish among the Jewish community. The hope that the torment was over, that the years of torture were over. However, upon returning home, many could not find what they had left behind. Buildings, that were once homes, workplaces, and gathering places, stood only as ruins, filled with emptiness.

Once a man shatters the feelings and dreams he holds in his heart, he can never fully restore them to their original form. They are irreplaceable and unique. We are all attached to some form of material existence, something that keeps us going. The home and the culture. Upon returning from camp, one seeks solace in familiar places, but instead encounters ruins and dishonor of one's ancestors and their memory. The synagogues, the cemetery, and the people that used to meet there every day were long gone. They had no choice but to seek refuge in the birthplace of their nation – Israel. Over the years, all that is left of a once strong and culturally rich nation are a few buildings and a cemetery. It is sinful to erase such a significant piece of history, leaving behind only a void left by the massacre that occurred over 75 years ago. As if nothing ever happened in Bardejov. The stories and memories of its residents have remained forgotten. The history of the Second World War was almost erased from the town.

However, some people decided to contribute to restoring and preserving the Jewish cultural heritage, because they were not indifferent to their fate. They restored communication with their descendants, ensuring the continuity of their lives. After all, everyone has a name and a destiny. They tried to collect and preserve the mosaic of a Jewish history that was destined for extinction. It is crucial to preserve what makes us human. Hopefully, the names of those who were deported and murdered, engraved on the tablets in the Holocaust Memorial, will never be forgotten. Their fate will be a lasting reminder. A man should be able to forgive, but he should never forget. Because those who are unaware of the past are bound to repeat its mistakes.

The Holocaust Memorial, the restored synagogue, and the Beit Midrash school building are all meaningful places for reflecting on the past. We should remember that radicalization can influence societal attitudes. Many cemeteries and synagogues have remained destroyed. In

Bardejov, the cemetery stands as a testament to the once-thriving Jewish community whose member's lives were tragically cut short. The tombstones stand as witnesses of the past.

The places mentioned above, which were once used for meditating, teaching, and praying, today serve as spaces for remembering and learning. Concerts, debates, and exhibitions all highlight the Jewish past and present. The link between the past and the present ensures that no person, place, or event that significantly influenced life in Bardejov will ever be forgotten. Places where neighbors, families, and relatives were once separated, now serve as areas for reunion and reconnection. As we get to know the people around us better, we discover more about ourselves. The answer to who we are and where we come from can be found in these renovated spaces. Let's not merely exist as beings confined to a particular space and time.

The synagogue was declared a cultural heritage site and on the 2nd of December 2000, the center of Bardejov and its suburbs were added to the UNESCO World Heritage List. This synagogue is unique. Apart from Skalica, there is no other nine-domed building in Slovakia, which emphasizes the importance of its reconstruction. The tradition began to come true and showed that people believed in a certain moral value. It is a demonstration that they were not indifferent to culture and the horrific events that took place during the Second World War. Although this act cannot atone for the wrongs done in the past, a process of atonement has been set in motion. This marked the start of not only monument restoration but also historical rectification. We cannot change the past, but we can change its consequences. And thus, the spaces of the Suburbia, including the Beit Midrash, the Mikveh, the synagogue, the tower, and the slaughterhouse, became symbols of Judaism in Bardejov. A symbol of patience, endurance, and strength. The synagogue is a reminder of how important moral values are. It is important to know the past of your ancestors and to preserve their traditions. They say that the Jewish religion is full of symbols and signs. The building built next to the Suburbia embodies the spirit of the people who perished under the Nazi regime. It is an expression of respect, homage, gratitude, and admiration, as well as a solemn prayer for those who suffered unjustly. "Every man has a name". Every name has a meaning that defines its bearer. The names engraved on tablets in the Holocaust Memorial, illuminated by the eternal light, are inscribed not only in the marble but also in the distant sky. Their actions, words, and thoughts contributed to the course of history, defining them as true heroes whose legacy transcends

mortal realms. Equally important, the tablets bear the names of those who were not afraid to take risks and were willing to help. The names of the righteous.

Although I am not Jewish, I cherish these places because they preserve the secrets of the war and the forgotten stories. They also represent the hardships experienced by the Jewish community persecuted simply because of their religion. The fates of dozens of innocent people were sealed at these places. I cherish the memory of the Jewish community in Bardejov. Because Jews are proud of their homeland, ancestors, and history, and strive to preserve not only material but also spiritual wealth. Although I cannot fully understand what the Jews experienced 75 years ago in these places, I believe that they would have wanted their children to visit the places where their ancestral homes stood and where their destinies began. They would have wished to see their proud and grateful faces for who they were. Their wishes are heard and carried out. I hope this memory will not fade away. Let's ensure that no person is forgotten or oppressed. Let's learn from the tragedies of the past, for our own sake and the future of our children. To preserve the memories of the past, to maintain the morals of the present, and to uplift the vision of the future.