

Heroes guilty only of humanity

I am holding a photograph of old Bardejov, and from it, figures in black caftans and tall hats stare back at me. They are standing on the street where I am standing today. They have a kind face. All I see are the cold, empty ritual buildings of the Jewish Suburbia, where the community's life once thrived. When did we allow hatred to escalate to such an extent? I stand here to shine a light on those who fought against the darkness, even if it meant risking their lives. Because I value not ONLY their courage, determination, and commitment, but also their calm demeanor in times of panic and fear. These qualities would also help us in the fight against extremism today. How many more times must history repeat itself? How many more people must die before we stop fighting each other? Who will fear for their lives as much as they did?

The lives of citizens. The lives of Jews. They were all people. Just like you and me. Stories of heroes who were forced to act because of the Holocaust. They did good. Despite all the hatred that surrounded them, they did ONLY good. Even though the Jewish community was an important part of the town and contributed to its economic and cultural character, it was not enough. The proof is that today ONLY the monuments tell the stories of the sixth-largest Jewish community, and yet many of us forget everything that anti-Semitism has erased. The Holocaust, which tragically ended the lives of not just one-third of Bardejov's population but also many beyond the town's borders, serves as a poignant reminder of a time when heroes were so desperately needed. People in whom courage triumphed over fear, morally upright decisions over orders, and good over evil. Light over darkness. Salvation over death. Humanity triumphed. Something you would look for in vain after the publication of the Jewish Code.

"My friends began to turn their backs on me. They stopped hanging out with me. They distanced themselves from us." This was the fate of most young Jewish women and girls my age. That is why these heroes were precious. They did not want to become heroes; they just wanted to live peacefully. They sacrificed their own lives and safety. Their own homes. Their acquaintances and exposure. These heroes were both Jews and non-Jews, including those within the concentration camps who offered aid. They managed to survive hell. They did not succumb to tremendous oppression but remained strong as rescuers. They offered a helping hand to their fellow prisoners, even though they were enduring the worst, in conditions rightly described as hell on earth. They did not give up.

Winton, Schindler, Vrba, Wetzler, Galinsky, Rozin, Löwy... They all did good even when evil persisted. They were brave, even when bravery was forbidden. They were deprived of their rights, crammed into wagons, and taken to extermination camps and concentration camps. Despite being full of fear, they found the strength to resist. They did not give up easily like cattle ready for slaughter. Fear for themselves was replaced by fear for others. Heroism was intertwined with constant fear, yet also woven with the golden thread of courage.

The approaching wave of deportations in Bardejov revealed one of the heroes. On the 20th of March 1942, women and girls began to gather in Bardejov. Rudolf Löwy knew he could not prevent what awaited them. As an influential citizen of the town, he learned about the upcoming deportations. His faith and convictions prevented him from fleeing. Even though he was relatively wealthy and could have hidden, escaped, and saved himself with false documents, he chose not to. He risked his exposure. His conscience, honor, and sense of responsibility compelled him to act and help alongside doctors Grosswirth and Atlas, who attempted to stage a fake typhus epidemic to save Jewish women and girls from deportation. After the medical examination, the girls were released. The rest were transported in cattle wagons on the morning of March 21st to Poprad, and from there, on March 25th, began their journey to the unknown - Auschwitz. 999 women. The staged action was uncovered. The Gestapo came for Löwy, pushed him into a car, and drove off to catch the last transport. Accompanying him was a letter that read: "Rudolf Löwy is more dangerous than 1,000 Jews!!!" He died on the 3rd of June 1942 in Auschwitz, where he perished after several weeks of torture. Thousands of women never became mothers, and never saw their mothers again; they were no longer daughters. Only the names inscribed in the long lists on the memorial remain. We must not forget. But these numbers are only the beginning.

The heroines of the tragedy were also Jewish women – mothers. I had the extraordinary opportunity to hear the testimony of a child whose mother fought against the Holocaust and its traumas even after the war ended. Through her story, I would like to highlight the incredible strength of courage that led her into this struggle. It is the story of Stefan Zora's mother, a woman who fled from death with a baby in her arms. Without her heroism and defiance, I would not be sitting in front of you today. Without her efforts to save me, I would not have had the chance to later save her. To bring light, joy, and hope to a dark time through my birth...

Unfortunately, my mother fell into the hands of those who lacked love in their hearts. In her final hiding place in November 1944, when she was exhausted and at her lowest, she wrote a letter and sent it to 17-year-old Mária Čemeričková. She was hiding more people in the basement. From food and water to warm clothes and hygiene items, she also provided toys for the children who often cried the whole night. My mother begged her for money. If she did not pay, a local peasant known as the "The Punisher" would throw her out.

For my mother, heroism was not only about the rescue itself but also about starting a new life. Faced with condemnation and uncertainty, with the yellow star still burning on her chest, the defenseless young woman still found the strength to fight. She did not lose hope when everyone around her gave up. She retained the heart of a warrior that life itself taught her to be. In the harshest winter, she waded through the snow and sought shelter in the dark forests. For a week, she sought shelter in the open despite sub-zero temperatures. Pursued like a wild beast, fleeing from the "beasts of men." She was discovered completely frozen by the gamekeeper Čermák, who then hid her with Tomi deep in the treetops, in a grove in the Fabianska valley. They spent four long months there until the 1st of April 1945, when Nitra was liberated. After spending time in the shelter, she learned of her husband's fate from a group of fleeing Jews. Géza was turned in, taken by the Gestapo, and deported to Auschwitz where he died at the age of 42.

Our heroes have lost too much, yet they have been saved. Bearing immense trauma deep in their souls, like a rot – something foul and insidious that was not their fault at all. Scarred by the cruel crimes of others, they were trying to fit back into life; this was their new victory. The paths of our two heroines converged thanks to the courage and fearlessness of a 17-year-old rescuer named Mária, and the hope carried by my Jewish mother, Lenka. They both experienced a long, dark but shared history as victims of Hitler's Nazi terror in Europe. Not everyone can help so selflessly and courageously. Mária became the light at the end of the tunnel for those struggling to survive. Even though, she was fighting for survival herself. A person with a beating heart, but a human face, which she did not lose even in difficult moments. She faced not only death but also the darkness that engulfed my mother, father, and even Tomi, simply because they were Jews... The heroism and courage of these two women created a circle of life and with their hope, they instilled faith in something stronger than death.

It was brave to defy a society full of criminals and collaborators, at a time when only a small group of determined people dared to do so. They were driven by love for their closest ones and fearlessness that defied the dangers surrounding them. Stories of heroism remind us that in the end, what truly matters is not what we do for ourselves, but what we have done for others. A well-known Jewish proverb states that: "Whoever saves a single life is considered by scripture to have saved the world." This proverb mirrors the power of the moral compass within us. But how extreme must the hatred have been for us to see survival as an act of heroism? Heroism had nothing to do with profit; the rescuers wanted to wake up every morning and see human dignity reflected in the mirror. Dignity must be earned and worn as a badge of honor, never to be lost.

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