

The lesson of the Holocaust for today's world

Are you also troubled by your conscience when you do something wrong? Sometimes it bothers me on behalf of others. When I think of the past, a shiver runs down my spine. Some people probably were not familiar with the word conscience. People's hatred of the Jews grew to enormous proportions. Who are the Jews? As we know from the past, Jews were not difficult to identify. They wore a kippah on their heads, which was a sign of recognition that there is Someone "above" us who watches our every act, they had a large beard as a symbol of wisdom, and so on. The common characteristic was their religiosity or a strong relationship to faith.

The first synagogues were built between 1810 and 1818. There are three synagogues in Bardejov, I even visited one of them. I found their culture very interesting. The Jews were among the few who contributed to the funding of the church. There were many myths about them, for example, that they were usurers, but the opposite was true. They were well-educated people who wanted their children to be educated as well. Their elementary school was called a cheder and their high school was called a yeshiva.

The Jews were social and formed various associations, including gymnastics and girls' clubs. In 1247, there was a Jewish community residing in our town. Later, a plague struck and wiped out about half of the residents. The Jews initially settled in villages such as Zlaté, Snakov, Rokytov, and so on. From 1790 they also came to Bardejov, where they began trading and doing business. Until now, I have not come across Jews condemning other people. Bardejov was one of the few towns that tolerated multiple religions until 1938. With the establishment of the Slovak state in 1939, also came the first anti-Jewish organizations. The Hlinka People's Party was established, and its guardsmen were known for their extreme cruelty towards Jews. Some say that they were worse than the Germans. Why did they suddenly start bothering us so much? In 1939, the first deportations and raids occurred in Jewish homes. When I heard about it, I felt ashamed of my country. The Nuremberg 'race laws' deprived Jews of their civil rights and prohibited them from marrying. They also started the first 'nonsense' prohibitions, such as banning them from entering parks, and they were marked with yellow tape and later with a yellow star. When the Germans conquered Poland in the autumn of 1939, they gained power over Polish Jews. In July 1941, Hitler approved the Final Solution of the Jewish Question. Concentration extermination camps, such as Auschwitz, were built in Polosk. He aimed to create a so-called 'pure race'. Anyone who did not meet Hitler's ideals was to be exterminated: blacks, gypsies, and especially Jews. They were either killed or condemned to the gas chamber. Various experiments, including those conducted on twins and the sterilization of women, were carried out on Jews. Take a moment to imagine yourself in their shoes. What did these people have to go through? We have no idea how many educated and potentially influential individuals have been condemned to death. Many Jews originally from Bardejov, who survived Hitler's rule, now reside in the USA, Israel, and various parts of Europe.

Despite the evil, some people bravely helped Jews escape or hid them in their dwellings. A few of these righteous men were from Bardejov, including Adam Bomba – a simple man who worked as a policeman and yet hid Jews. Vasil' Kyjovský – an ordinary peasant who disagreed with what was going on. Even though he was interrogated by the Gestapo, he continued helping

the Jews. Jozef Kisel – the postman who informed the Jews about what was going on. Štefan Tarcala – an arresting officer who helped to hide Jews. Anna Koperniechova deserves a valuable mention as she did not allow the Germans, the guardsmen, or the Russians to enter the synagogue. Only her daughter is alive today. Andrej Židišin – the Greek Catholic priest in Resov also saved several Jews. People later turned him in because of his willingness to help and save human lives. Even the merchant František Gábor did not hesitate to aid a Jewish family who sought refuge after breaking into his house; he provided them with care and shelter. While there were indeed righteous people, their numbers were too few in comparison to the overwhelming evil.

Why did we allow something like this in the past? Why did we let so many innocent people die? Why didn't anybody do something to save them and stand up against Hitler? Were we that corrupt? This was all about the restriction of basic human rights.

Even in today's world, we can find many forms of racism and condemnation. In the second half of the twentieth century, people were convinced, at least most of them, that something like the Second World War must not happen again. Yet, recent events in Central Europe may evoke concerns that a similar catastrophe could unfold.

This is due to two basic phenomena that are also linked to the past – racism and nationalism. In Slovakia, the issues surrounding the Slovak-Hungarian conflict and the Roma community have persisted for a long time. During the Holocaust, the Jews were regarded as outsiders, even though they had been here for centuries. Today, the Roma, who have been on our territory for over 200 years, are still considered outsiders, much like the refugees escaping from Afghanistan and Syria. Above all, we should view them as people in need and help. The majority of the underprivileged are Roma. Few people realize that their poverty is the cause of exclusion and also of many crime-related incidents. In Slovakia, there is a genuine concern that racial extermination could happen once again. People do not tolerate the Roma lifestyle. Most of us have a problem with the Roma minority. We call them 'gypsies' and often marginalize them.

Almost everyday, crime revolves around scavenging for food, and you have probably witnessed how they do it. While overt discrimination is no longer common, its more subtle versions are still evident. On the Internet, we can even find the category "subhuman", which points more and more toward Roma inferiority. It is well known that members of the Roma minority are rarely represented in the public administration, the police, or the armed forces. Is that surprising? If I were to ask five people, 99% of the time, no one would consider hiring a Roma person for a serious job. Street names, signs, and banners usually ignore Roma dialects. Neither officials nor people try to speak the language of minorities, even in regions where they are relatively more represented. We can even encounter various political parties or organizations that are 'trying' to solve the Roma issue. An increasing number of young people are being influenced by bad attitudes. In Poland, for example, a significant portion of young voters have also supported a party whose agenda is a protest against the liberal elites, but also strong nationalism. Of course, in Slovakia a significant number of young people have supported a party with a similar character. People are no longer interested in the integration of the Roma but in the question of how to get rid of them. All of this is causing increasing tension and irritation.

Modern racism often exploits cultural differences, with the latest focus being on refugees seeking safety for their families. Their reason for emigration is the ongoing war in their homeland. Upon their arrival on our territory, the first questions that arise are: "Should we fear them? Are they a threat or an asset to us?" Whatever the reasons for emigration, we are obliged to take action to contribute to the implementation of a Human Rights Foreign Policy. We must provide aid to refugees without hesitation. But some people still do not want them on their territory. These are people in need, and it is not for us to debate whether they deserve help. Refugee policy in Slovakia is very strict compared with other European countries. However, if such a situation were to arise on our territory, we would like other countries to welcome us with open arms. Is that not ridiculous? We are unwilling to assist others, yet we expect assistance ourselves. Our attitudes are to some extent influenced by fear of the unknown and xenophobia. According to a survey, 70% of Slovak citizens are against accepting refugees.

Denial is not an opinion; it is just an egotistical abdication of responsibility for humanity and a community in need. We do not realize that we are driving ourselves towards a similar situation that was once there. It is both shameful and unacceptable that the basic human rights of those people are being restricted like this. In my opinion, a truly free country can protect human dignity and rights by offering shelter to non-citizens as well.

Who would have imagined that such a small country could be so deeply steeped in racism? Unfortunately, this is also happening all over Europe. It comes from the general tendency to categorize people into groups of "like us" and "different." Unfortunately, prejudices are deeply rooted within us. This is one of the few things that can be compared to the past. Even today, some people point out differences and condemn other races or religions. Unfortunately, this was the case in the past and remains so today. Sadly, we call ourselves a Christian state, but if someone needs to be accepted, many of us hesitate to lend a hand. Does our faith not teach us the exact opposite? Some preached the idea of help and did not hesitate to get involved. Even The Pope himself prayed for those who did not want to help refugees. He was also involved in a Europe-wide debate. So where is the problem?

The root of the problem lies in the dehumanization of people. We are divided into good and bad, white or black. Where is the humanity and tolerance? Do we even recognize the word tolerance? This word means being patient and forbearing, allowing everyone the freedom to express their attitudes or opinions. Individuals should prioritize the well-being of others over their own and, above all, respect people's rights. Where did all this go? Let's give others a chance as well. We should work towards reducing their social and political isolation and enhancing their living conditions. Let's emphasize that racism is cowardly and strive to treat each other as equals. Let's fight it by educating, promoting tolerance, integrating, empowering other races, and so on. Maybe with this approach, we can change the world and highlight past injustices that could have been prevented.

Let's show that we can learn from our mistakes and make efforts to correct them. None of us, I hope, can fathom such a tragedy occurring in today's world. Let's reflect on the past, honor the memory of the victims, and ensure that history doesn't repeat itself. That's why Remembrance Day should stand as a tribute to the Holocaust victims.

However, many people have forgotten, or perhaps do not even want to remember, what happened in the past. Why? After all, each of us visits the cemetery to light a candle on the graves of our departed loved ones. Perhaps someone who perished in the Holocaust is at the root of your family tree. And even if not, do they still not deserve to be remembered? Recently, the first Holocaust Museum in Sered' was established. It is a tribute to those who suffered greatly from past injustices. I found the concept and execution of the memorial project in Bardejov very impressive. It is more than just words. It made me want to know more about the Holocaust. Every time I pass by this memorial, I'm reminded of what things were like before. I shared what I learned with my classmates and loved ones because we must not forget. Why? Primarily, a memorial like this serves as a warning, reminding us to never repeat such acts. It carries a message from the Holocaust to the present, emphasizing that every person has the right to life, regardless of their race or religion.

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