

**"What would Bardejov look like today if the Second World War had never occurred, and the Jewish community still lived among us in our town?"**

"Bardejov – Small Jerusalem".

It was the 16th of May 2001. Is that a meaningless date? For me, it is not. On this day, someone was born who has had a profound impact on my life and has become a significant part of it. It was Rachel.

Nathan Guttman's family somehow came into my life. To provide context, the Guttmans were descendants of the founders of the Jewish community in Bardejov. They founded a synagogue, a school, a cemetery, and a poorhouse. They were an essential part of our town and left over 3,000 descendants, some of whom I still meet on the streets to this day. The streets were full of Christians and Jews, who later subscribed to the Orthodox movement.

But how do I know all of this? My best friend Rachel is Jewish. A short, thin girl with dark hair and bright brown eyes. She is beautiful, smart, and the only daughter in her kind family. Her father works for the Bardejov Rabbinical Office of the Jewish community and 30 surrounding communities. Her mother is a teacher in a Jewish school. And Rachel? She has been flashing before my eyes for years, but we never talked. Until one day...

Orthodox Jews embody their desire for soul union with God in every action. They are kind and very loving, just like Rachel. We met by chance and our conversation did not last long because of Shabbat. Shabbat is considered the most significant day in the life of every Jew, perhaps even more significant than Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). It is only on Shabbat that people from the congregation are called up to read from the Torah in the synagogue.

I asked Rachel where she was going as she left the synagogue since the streets were empty and I had no friends. Only later did I understand where she was coming from and that she did not have time for me. However, I insisted we find time to talk and get to know each other better. My life was quite ordinary, and my family was not rich. I only had one friend, Jacob, because nobody else wanted to hang out with Jews. I wanted to be different. But why? I knew they were just like us, but I wanted to be sure. Someone must have heard me, and so I saw Raschka (it is a nickname

I gave Rachel the second time I met her) again. We became sisters. My name, Elizabeth, turned into Betina, and Rachel became Raschka.

We did everything inconspicuously. Even our first meetings were shrouded in mystery. It was unusual to have Jewish friends, although there were many of them in town. In a few months, we became friends for life and death; I knew everything about her. We shared every single secret. Three days before the holiday when Jews put an eight-branched candelabrum (or Hanukkiah – a nine-branched candelabrum that serves as a servant to light the candles) in their windows, Raschka told me what I had no idea about. "Betina, I have fallen in love with Jacob." At first, I did not even breathe. We both knew it was not allowed. Jews have strict rules. I would not have dreamed of seeing my best friend unhappy. Our conversation suddenly fell silent. Did you tell anyone? There has to be a solution, right? Are you seeing Jacob? So many questions and unspoken answers. "I told my mom," she said. "Are you crazy?", snapped inside of me. At the time, I thought I was going to choke Raschka. "What did she say?" I asked even though the answer was in my mind. Of course, Mom yelled at her, as moms tend to do, and immediately forbade her from seeing him. Judging by the unceasing tears on my only friend's face, I figured it must have been intense. The Orthodox community was quite closed off and did not tolerate things like that. They have a shadchan (a matchmaker) to find suitable partners.

An unstoppable flow of emotions swirled my mind. I wanted to help her. The Feast of Dedication is a Jewish holiday that begins on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev and lasts for eight days. For eight days straight I thought intensely about this illicit love. I borrowed books on Jewish culture. And let me tell you, the librarian gave me quite the look. Pesach, Yom Kippur, Shabbat, Purim, or Rosh Hashanah. In every piece of literature, this foreign terminology kept popping up. Gradually, I learned the holidays and the traditions of Rachel's faith. Knowing how religious her entire family was, I understood with a pain in my soul that their love was out of the question. And what about Jacob? I bumped into him outside Mr. Schondorf's Kosher Foods, the place where Raschka and I usually met. He was pretty freaked out by the situation as well. I wanted to ease the tension a bit, so as we walked, I found myself randomly talking about kashrut. It is a set of Jewish regulations telling us what we can and cannot eat, what we can combine with what, and how to prepare the food. The fundamental point of kashrut is the division of food into kosher (clean) and treif (unclean). Unclean food must not be eaten under any circumstances. This is

commanded by the Torah. "Jacob, do you even know what the Torah is? I mean, you two cannot be together." I said. I did not want to lose either of them, I was the epicenter of their romance. It was more difficult for me than it was for the two of them. After Hanukkah, Rachel and I met. I do not think I have ever seen such a sad face in my life. "Is something wrong?" I asked. "Mom told Dad." She replied. It was not exactly the cheerful greeting I was hoping for after a long time since we had seen each other. Do you think he handled this information well? Since he worked in the Rabbinical Office he had a lot of contacts, especially with the Chief Rabbis in Nowy Sacz, Poland. I have heard this information several times. But I had no idea that her father had promised to arrange her marriage to Rabbi Steiner's nephew a few years back. Neither did she. I felt incredibly sorry for her. Over the past year of our close friendship, it seemed that the weight had become too much for her to bear. She kept telling me that whether she liked it or not, she would have to marry him. "You take responsibility for your actions, your guilt." She said. I could not let Rachel do anything stupid again and I certainly could not let her meet Jacob again. My grandmother was familiar with Jewish culture. She told me that Rachel would be expelled from the Jewish community if she disobeyed. I came to understand that in Jewish culture, a girl from a respectable family might expect her parents to arrange a marriage with a wealthy boy. They will open a store or a tavern, have many children, and put up a mezuzah on the door frame (expressing their love of God and affiliation with Judaism), and the parents will be happy that their daughter is well taken care of. Are they going to like each other? How is it going to be? These questions were running through my mind. No matter what, I wanted Rachel to know that I was there for her.

I am sorry to say that our fears have come true. I received a white envelope from Rachel. My hands were shaking as I opened it. Inside I found a wedding announcement and a folded piece of paper. Rachel and Kazimierz are getting married on the 14th of March 2019 in one of the synagogues in Bardejov. Rashka, that beautiful and wise girl who has grown close to my heart will get married at 18. In her letter, she described her fiancé to be handsome, thoughtful, and kind. "I love you Betina!" were the final words in the letter. I burst into tears of joy. I prayed that she would be happy and that her future husband would allow us to be friends, even though I am not Jewish. I could not go to the wedding, but I knew in my mind that she would have a good time. I was excited about the idea of Bardejov becoming home to another young Jewish family. Our town has grown into a place where people with different cultures, traditions, and religions live together and respect each other.

Life brings all sorts of people in our way. It introduced me to a man I never judged for his faith or culture. It also brought Rachel into my life – a friend for life and death.

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