

Heroism and determination during the Holocaust

Courage, bravery, heroism, or fearlessness. Whatever term we use, the essence and truth behind the word remain unchanged. It is a strong and unwavering will that we all have. Some may not realize it, but it is true. We often linger in the background until we muster the courage to face our fears. As Paulo Coelho said: "Courage is fear that prays." There is some truth to that. "He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life. He who does not risk only survives." We do not need to think deeply about this statement at all. Courage drives us to change, while fear pushes us to be courageous. Everything is interconnected. If we do not muster courage, nothing will ever change. Someone who acts fearlessly is also more likely to succeed in achieving their goal. Fearlessness empowers us to overcome fear, maintain a strong will, and persevere in challenging situations where good must be defended.

My heroes have earned their place in history by being fearless. Their courage and commitment to justice and goodness drove them to risk their most precious possessions – their lives. The willingness to sacrifice themselves for millions of innocent people propelled them to act and take risks. They showed their moral values and bravery.

There is a story that serves as an endless inspiration for many who are searching for courage. Alfréd Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba are clear examples that there is always a way to offer aid. You just need to discover the motivation that is worth fighting for, even if it means risking your own life. This is illustrated in the heartbreaking story of two young heroes who did the impossible. In a time, full of evil and inhuman conditions, they found the courage to defy. This story highlights a profound pursuit of freedom, driven not only by personal liberation but also by a deep desire to save others. People, whose fates remained trapped without hope behind the gates of the Death Factory - in Auschwitz. Not even the intimidation of the SS could shake their determination to carry out their plan. The desire to save people was greater than the fear of what would follow after a possible exposure. The flogging and hanging from the gallows were a clear warning that no one should even think of escaping. Despite all of this, they managed to escape on the 7th of April 1944, the day on which the Jews commemorate their liberation from Egyptian captivity. A glimmer of hope appeared on the horizon. Let us not forget the heroes who helped them escape but remained trapped behind the gates that denied them their freedom. They placed their lives in the hands of

these two young individuals. Perhaps, that was what drove them forward. They were aware that a significant number of people depended on their rescue and risked exposure for their escape. Thus, they began their quest for liberation. For the first three days, they hid in fear. When the situation calmed down, they set out on a long and difficult journey. After 140 kilometers, they finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel. They encountered kind-hearted people along the way, whose assistance led them to Žilina, where they wrote their testimony for the whole world to hear. They managed to save 400,000 Jewish citizens from deportation.

The achievements of Wetzler and Vrba earned my respect. Their story inspires me to fight for what I truly want. I admire how they achieved so much, driven solely by their courage. I am certainly not the only one they inspired. Their story is a powerful testament to how far human courage and motivation can go. That is why I chose this story. I do not want the achievements of these young men to be forgotten. This story shows that with the right motivation, a clear goal, and even a glimmer of hope, it is always worth fighting. Even a little hope can give profound meaning to our actions.

An equally exceptional example of human cohesion, courage, and empathy is the story of the priest Andrej Židišín, who, despite extreme danger, took this risk and saved many lives. Despite knowing the risks of hiding Jews from the Hlinka Guard or Gestapo, his solidarity and love for people outweighed his fear. Although he loved his family above all, his moral compass compelled him to act according to his principles. It was not only the duty of a priest to act according to Christian values, but it was first and foremost humanity that drove him to act. I watched an online meeting featuring Ms. Valeria, daughter of Mr. Židišín, with the rescued family of Mr. Tom Tomasov and his mother Agnes, who was 14 or 15 years old at the time. It was filled with gratitude, kind words, and tears. The face-to-face encounter, although only through a webcam, had tremendous power. It is incredible to witness how some compassionate souls go to great lengths to save a single human life, even at the cost of their own. It is a clear example that human empathy, cohesiveness, kind-heartedness, and above all fearlessness have no limits.

I cannot overlook one more hero with an extraordinary soul, who distinguished themselves with unparalleled courage and an unyielding commitment to goodness and justice. His deeds were admirable, and only a few could match his honorable judgment.

Rudolf Löwy – Jewish hero from Bardejov – rescuer of girls. This man decided to use his position and connections to rescue young Jewish girls and later boys when he heard about the upcoming deportations to Poland. He acted out of a sense of humanity and responsibility to his community. His honor did not allow him to do otherwise. The urge of humanity was stronger, and it overcame and pushed aside the fear of endangering his own life. He took full advantage of his position and delayed the date of the first deportation. When he learned that 999 young girls were to be deported, he had no choice but to act. He immediately set about devising a plan. It was a crazy and dangerous idea. He artificially created a typhus epidemic by vaccinating the girls, who gradually began to show symptoms. The guardsmen were frightened of possible infection, so they sent the girls home. They could have taken advantage of the situation to hide or flee to Hungary. A similar procedure he then used with boys. However, the guardsmen did not forgive him. Rudolf Löwy had enough money, he could have chosen to escape or pay for a safe hiding place. Instead, he faced humiliation and insults. Finally, he was arrested and transported to Žilina, where he was subjected to torture and then deported. As a man of decisive courage, he rightly aroused fear of the Hlinka Guards, which resulted in the statement, "I would rather have a thousand Jews than one Rudolf Löwy." For his unwavering determination and dedication to help the community, he paid the ultimate price – his life in a concentration camp.

Despite being exposed, we must not forget his remarkable deeds. He was one of those who believed that stepping out of the crowd and lending a helping hand to the defenseless was the greatest service one could offer. Despite the presence of evil, God also sent angels to earth – heroes who were willing and ready to offer aid.

Why did I choose these stories, you may ask? Each story was different in some way. A different hero, a different plot, a different background, a different social position in society. Despite all this, they have a lot in common. The strength of intrinsic motivation, moral values, defiance in the face of danger, and an unwavering desire to save human life. As I mentioned earlier, these men have reached the pinnacle of courage and can rightly be called heroes. They did not desire to become heroes, but that is what they became. They did not just stand by helplessly. They acted out of pure moral conviction, which did not allow them to do otherwise.

The question is whether there is anyone today who would be willing to risk everything they have, even their own life, to save someone else's without being asked to do so. The deeds of these

heroes, their courage and fearlessness, should be a model for us and should be remembered and celebrated. These stories mirror a past we must never forget. As a younger generation, we cannot view these events as mere history, for we never know when the past might become reality again. We have already been silent once, and that tragic mistake has cost the lives of millions of children, men, and women. Let us not ever again experience such a long, painful, and sorrowful silence.

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