

Heroism during the Holocaust

A hero is an exceptional person, who stands out for his actions, attitudes, and courage. But who do we consider heroes nowadays? Children often see heroes in science fiction movies, where they battle evil and protect the world from hostile robots. The struggle between good and evil occurs in both fairy tales and real life. But let's be honest, being brave is not that difficult. Anything is possible if one has the will and the ability to do it. So, who are the real heroes and what was their motivation? Human history is filled with heroic deeds that should never be forgotten. Just like the deeds of the heroes during the Holocaust. But how often do we think about the fates of those who survived the horrors of the Second World War and the heroes who sacrificed so much? They lost their loved ones and their homes, and experienced hatred first-hand. The fear and memories of the war became their identity, a nightmare that haunted them for the rest of their lives. No one truly understood the psychological struggles and hardships endured by these victims.

Let's go back to the past. What do we find there? The fates of innocent people who were marginalized, deprived of their rights, and marked with a yellow star and a number for easy identification. They were deprived of their identity, their name, their human dignity, their freedom, and, eventually, their life. Many stood by helplessly, unsure of what to do or how to stop the nightmare of the Holocaust. They were loaded into cattle wagons and taken to extermination camps. Images associated with the Holocaust such as wagons, crowds of people going to their deaths, hunger, filth, disease, hard labor, wire, selection, ramps, tattooed numbers, Auschwitz-Birkenau, gas chambers, chimneys, and death. We know all of this from films, books, and testimonies. These horrors are stored somewhere in our subconscious, but I feel like they do not affect us anymore. These very events marked the lives of my heroes. Hence, the question arises: Was it easy for them to act courageously?

Even today, we struggle to provide rational answers to these questions: Why? What were they guilty of? Was it a disagreement with Nazi ideology? Did Hitler, as the ruler of the world, believe he had the right to determine the life and death of people who did not fit the criteria of the Aryan race? Propaganda, hatred, and fear intertwined and deceived many people. It was a form of ideology that was built on racism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism that culminated in genocide. Equally important were the myths that spread through society and created the background for the

legitimacy of the political fight against the "Jewish parasites." We know the historical and economic context, but what about the social and moral one? Why did the foundations of humanist morality – love of neighbor, compassion, empathy, and responsibility – disappear so easily? After all, they are the foundations of humanity.

The Holocaust had its perpetrators, its victims, its collaborators, and its silent majority. But also, heroes who rightly deserve to stand in the spotlight. What made them special? Their deeds manifested on different levels. Many Christians bravely offered aid and hid their Jewish friends in barns, cellars, or forests, providing them with food and everything needed for survival. They helped them escape and create false documents. They were willing to take risks and lend a helping hand. We are familiar with the names of rescuers like Nicholas Winton, who organized trains to transport Jewish children to England, and Oskar Schindler. They were not deterred by fear or by the excessive risk they were taking. Jewish heroes also did not give up. They did not succumb to pressure and fear, and consciously took risks. They resisted in the camps, organized aid as best they could, and managed to maintain their courage and humanity even amidst the greatest of hells. Many doctors also decided to help the innocent. One of them was Gizela Pearl, who performed secret abortions on young women to help them survive, or Mala Zimetbaum, who served as a messenger in Auschwitz and achieved the impossible. They were courageous women whose defiance led them to action. They were considerate of others. Jewish boys were also involved in organizing the resistance, they joined the partisans. The immense courage was also seen in the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto, who were not discouraged by an unequal fight. They proudly raised their heads and stood up to the resistance, which was cruelly suppressed. They understood they did not have a chance to win, yet perhaps it was their youthful indiscretion that tempered their fear and bolstered their defiance. They were not fighting to be remembered in history books but to express their opposition to Nazi ideology and refuse to be led like defenseless, submissive herds to execution. They were poorly armed but held their heads high with pride. They had no desire to be heroes, they only wanted to preserve their honor.

The well-known Slovak Jews Rudolf Vrba and Alfréd Wetzler also showed immense courage in their escape from Auschwitz-Birkenau. Rudolf Vrba was first deported to the Majdanek camp in Poland. Later, he was transferred to Auschwitz. He became prisoner number 44,070. Finally, he had "luck" - a slim hope of survival - as he was assigned to work for a commando

known as "Kanada," where 2,000 men and women toiled on the Jewish ramp. They removed the dead bodies. On the 15th of January 1943, this commando was transferred to Birkenau – the extermination camp. There, Vrba met Wetzler, who was prisoner number 29,162. Allegedly, these two heroes had known each other before and decided to attempt their planned escape. On Friday, the 7th of April 1944, they went on the run. They were assisted by a camp resistance composed of individuals who believed that this hell would one day come to an end. Fellow prisoners, who were afraid to try to escape because they feared for their lives, helped them by covering them with boards while they hid in the hole they had dug. That evening the camp commandant announced their escape. They spent three days in hiding and then they made their way to the Polish-Slovak border. In the process, they encountered a German patrol, but they were lucky and managed to escape. Upon arrival in Žilina, they wrote a 32-page detailed report to let the world know the truth about the atrocities they experienced in the extermination camps. The report contained credible and detailed information that they provided to the Allies. It was published by BBC Radio and in The New York Times. They demanded an end to the mass deportations, but initially, the world was skeptical. Human reason struggled to comprehend these unimaginable atrocities.

Their courage illuminated the path before them. They decided to help innocent people and to expose the atrocities committed by the Nazis to the world. Given the positions they held in the camp, they could have survived until the end of the war or died trying to escape. Hungry, poorly clothed, exposed to random people in unfamiliar terrain, and having to rely on the help of villagers. The indomitable strength of defiance, but also the natural fear of not being led like sheep to execution, prevailed within them and gave them strength. They were driven by an inner strength marked by humanity. Sacrificing themselves on behalf of others.

We must also remember the people who sheltered young children, who could not comprehend what was happening and why their parents abandoned them. These decisions were very difficult and made for their own good so that they would have at least some chance to live. Yes, these people were real heroes too. There are still survivors from whom we can learn first-hand experiences of what truly happened and the atrocities they witnessed, including the suffering inflicted on their loved ones. I was captivated by a story from Bardejov, where a young Jewish family entrusted their newborn to a taxi driver and his wife, who drove the child to Giraltovce. I

cannot even imagine what the parents must have been going through when they abandoned their child.

Heroism is also the main theme of the "Righteous Among the Nations" award. We will not know the names of all the heroes who deserve it, but it is important not to forget those we know about. Sadly, in today's world, characterized by the rise of extremism, radicalization, and anti-Semitism, people may fear acknowledging and sharing the heroic deeds of their families. I am not surprised. Who would want to recall the tragic reality of Jewish families being murdered and relatives left in uncertainty, not knowing what happened to their loved ones or if they would ever see them again? Bardejov also has its Righteous. Some are also listed as "Righteous Among the Nations" (Adam Bomba, Stefan Tarcala, Jozef Kisel, Vasil Kyjovsky, Andrej Židišín). I am glad that in our town there were people with their hearts in the right place. They were no strangers to humanity and fear did not tie their hands. They acted with Christian and humanistic values, driven by love for their neighbors. These were the true heroes because they risked their lives to save others. Can we find that strength in ourselves today? I am afraid to answer this question when I see "otherness" once again becoming a target. Many young people are still embracing unsubstantiated reports and myths, searching for an outlet for their anger and frustration.

We should learn from the past and not repeat its mistakes. We should talk more about the past to ensure that the sacrifices and sufferings of these heroes will never be forgotten. We must pass on the testimony that we, as young people, are becoming bearers of, so that it will be preserved for generations to come. Never again.

The real heroes were those who were able to prevail morally, and victory became a permanent imprint on their souls. Yet, they suffered for not being able to save more people, and for not being able to help each other more...

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