

Memory as a Silent Voice and a Promise

September 1, 1939, was said to be a cold Friday. In Jewish households, the Sabbath was beginning. The greatest of Jewish holidays — a symbol of family, home, peace, togetherness, love, understanding, and spiritual strength. Children were returning from school, mothers were preparing the table, fathers were trying, in the quiet of the sacred day before the evening prayers, to find meaning in the increasingly frightening news. In the evening, the women lit the candles and spoke the blessing. In those moments, home still existed, and the world still seemed to be in order. But every Sabbath after that, and holidays like Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, became symbols of Jewish suffering. During those times, Jewish families were together — and that made them easy to capture.

And then it came. German soldiers crossed the Polish border, and the Second World War began — a conflict that by 1945 claimed more than 60 million lives, six million of them Jewish.

For the Jewish community in Europe, and also in Slovakia, it meant something far more terrifying. The age of darkness had begun. Something no one believed could ever become so terrible, even though the rumors were spreading. There were those who said — “let’s run.” It was not just war; it was systematic, state-driven, and planned extermination of the innocent. It was meant to be the end of their lives, their faith, their memory.

From September 1939, life changed radically in Slovakia as well. The Jewish Code and its 276 regulations — exclusion from social and economic life, prohibition from studying or working, from going to the cinema, the park, the café, from walking anywhere but on the “correct” side of the street, restrictions on movement, confiscation of property. Jews became enemies — the unwanted. Their neighbors, their friends, suddenly fell silent, turned their eyes away. Among people spread fear and suspicion. Like a silent poison, it slowly killed. It was not enough — Jews gradually lost their identity, their dignity, their family, their lives. Their everyday life, prayers in the synagogue, conversations at the doorway, chatter, laughter of children — all were interrupted, silenced, and finally destroyed.

Fear became a part of life. Yet it was not only fear of death that kept many from extending a helping hand when it was needed, but also fear of whom to trust — who would betray them? Morality was sorely tested. Some hid others; some informed. The world was divided, though the boundaries were not always clear. The enemies, yes — they had yellow stars. They were a problem to be solved. The Wannsee Conference of 1942 brought the outcome known as the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question.” From that same year, transports left Slovakia — to the unknown, to places where extermination and concentration camps stood, where there were inhuman conditions, suffering, and finally death. Where neighbors’ eyes could not see. The fascist regime in Slovakia dispatched 58 transports carrying more than 57,000 + 13,000 people of Jewish faith. With the silent consent of society, they loaded even the elderly, the sick, and even children. Despite terrible

torment. Despite the fact that every morning they awoke with fear in their hearts and death breathing down their necks. To Bardejov itself, only about 170 Jews returned.

My reflection is not built only on facts from books and films. War is not a computer game that does not concern us. It is also the real story of a family that was not given the chance to survive those dreadful times.

Its narrator is Vilam Herz, who had a wife, Etela, and a seven-year-old daughter — Editka.

“We moved from Košice to Bardejov. During the Sabbath, the house smelled of freshly baked challah; my wife covered her face and, over the burning candles, spoke the blessing. Editka loved those moments — with her wide eyes she watched us and sang softly to herself. We sat together at the table, prayed with humility, gratitude, and love. That was our home, 1942. On May 18 it changed — we didn’t know where we were going; no one told us. They drove us into cattle cars with others. We took only what was most necessary. Editka took her doll and a picture of our house. We found ourselves in the ghetto — in the area of Puławy, Nałęczów. In a place where houses had no real roofs, where we were hungry, thirsty, cold, and filthy. It seemed that time had stopped. It didn’t last long, and they separated us. From that day, I never saw my wife and daughter again. I worked in the forest, and one day a fellow prisoner told me that the people from the ghetto had been murdered. It was a huge blow — my wife, my child. Why? I escaped, hid in the forest, and in my ears I constantly heard Editka’s voice when she sang. Because when you sing, you are still alive. I survived. I returned to Bardejov — from our transport, no one came back. I was alone; I no longer had a home. The window where Editka used to sit and look out at the street was empty and broken. Weeds grew in the yard, and in my heart — silence. They say that a home does not exist without close people. When, years later, we who had survived met again, we realized that despite everything, we still carry our home within us. Not as a place, but as a promise that says: do not forget. I often think of my Editka.”

Today, eighty years after the war, we young people stand before the duty not only to remember but also to understand. To understand what war did to a human being — how it destroyed trust, community, and what shadow it has left behind. We are obliged, in the silence of remembrance, to remind ourselves, not to forget, so that their violent death will not have been in vain.

The Holocaust is not just an ordinary story of the past. It is a mirror showing where hatred, indifference, lust for power, and silence lead us. The tragedy of that era lies not only in the beasts in human skin but also in the silent society. On whose side will they stand in the decisive moment? Are there not today enough situations that tempt us once again? How will we decide?

Memory is not only respect for innocent victims who were not allowed to live their lives; it is a defense, to make sure it never happens again. Memory means to protect, to preserve within us the

voices of those who can no longer speak. Perhaps we cannot truly learn, but this experience should remain a warning to us.

Does it remind you of something? People who were afraid, silent, who hated and envied. Politicians who approved laws, attacked difference, discriminated and restricted. Newspapers that manipulated, spread propaganda, wrote about the unwanted, the plague, the vermin. Offices that printed lists. And only the innocent victims remained...

Let us remember that war does not begin with tanks on the borders, with ramps in camps, or with selections. It begins when we stop caring about others. It begins when we no longer see — and cowardly remain silent.

It is eighty years after the war — what will we do with Editka's story? Memory is responsibility. So little of them remains — and yet so much. The Jewish Suburbia in Bardejov is proof of it. Empty buildings — the Synagogue, the Beth Midrash, the Mikveh. One no longer hears their voices, the singing from the synagogue, children do not run from the cheder, by the boiler house one no longer smells the cholent. And yet, something remains. Something that cannot be destroyed as easily as the body. Memory! Presence in absence, the imprint of their lives. If we remember, then they are still here. Not as ghosts of the past, but as a part of our human memory and moral conscience within us.

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