From the Shadows of the Past

War is a test of humanity. It takes no regard for age, faith, or dreams. It shatters and destroys families, turns children into orphans. It makes no distinction between the innocent and the guilty. With its brutality, it strikes everyone alike. It is a word that inspires fear.

The Second World War was one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th century. The number of victims, the suffering in concentration camps, the systematic extermination of millions — all of it left a scar that will never fully heal. Yet in that vast chaos, there were also silent heroes — women and men who, despite the horror, did not lose their humanity. Their stories remind us of what human beings are capable of — both good and evil. War need not remain only a film; it can become our reality if we cease to be vigilant.

They say war is a man's affair. My heroine is Regina — a woman whose youth was cut short by war. She is proof of courage, sacrifice, and an unbreakable will to survive even in the darkest of times.

"Let us never be afraid to tell the truth, and never be afraid to do what we believe is right. The fact that someone does not believe us, or simply refuses to see the dark reality, does not mean it did not happen — or that it is all a fabrication." These were the words of Regina Veselá to a young woman. Her soul was aching, and her face bore the marks of time and of a cruel past. Regina was born on February 6, 1923, in a small town — Bardejov. Her story began more than a hundred years ago. She is no longer among us, but I will tell you her sorrowful story, because as they say: whoever becomes a witness to a story is obliged to pass it on, so that the victims of the Holocaust do not die a second death. These stories help us preserve memory. They have their own power — and they are a hope that even in the darkest times, we must never give up hope.

A strong, brave Jewish woman — a survivor — and above all, a woman with roots deeply set in the ground, with a steadfast spirit and humanity. When Regina was nine months old, she left with her parents for America. When she was seven, her childhood in the far West ended, and she and her mother moved back to Bardejov. They say a mother's love is the strongest magic in the world, but Regina did not have that fortune, for she lost her mother very early. She knew what hunger was. She knew what fear was. She knew what it was like to hide under a table when screams echoed outside the windows. They were not hers — they belonged to a world collapsing in on itself. There was no one to stroke her hair or wipe away the tears streaming down her small cheeks. Her aunts passed her around, traded her from one to another; she never had a stable home. Instead of kind words, there were insults and a life without love.

And then the war came. Overnight, friends became strangers. Neighbors became informants. School became exile. Regina, a small Jewish girl, began to understand that her name, her faith, her origin — were the reasons someone could take her life at any moment. Not because of what she

had done, but because of who she was. The principal expelled her from school — Jewish children did not belong there. Her aunt Toňa took her in, in another town. Finally, someone who truly cared for her and loved her. In her childish naivety, she rejoiced, thinking perhaps everything would finally settle and that after the storm, a rainbow would appear. But how wrong she was. Malice began to reach out its hands. Despite the bans against employing Jews, a doctor took her into his practice, where she could learn a trade. And perhaps it was precisely this that later saved Regina's life.

It was 1942, and nineteen-year-old Regina fell in love for the first time — the innocence and beauty of first love. Perhaps it might have grown into something deeper, but the Slovak State, under the influence of Nazi Germany, decided on the deportation of Jews. Regina resolved to flee — through Prešov to Hungary and Turkey, and further to the Promised Land. Fear and anxiety tangled within her, intertwined with hope. The growing lump in her throat was a foreboding of evil. And it came: the Gestapo arrested her aunt Toňa and her little daughter. In a letter, it was written that if she did not return, they would shoot them. She could not allow them to die because of her. Her dream of escape dissolved. Upon her return, she was locked in a cellar, beaten, her American passport confiscated, and she was dragged to the train — the cattle car. It was March 1942, and one of the first transports was about to depart. No one knew what awaited them. At the station, she endured humiliation; they stripped her of her last belongings. The guards told the women that where they were going, they would be well cared for — they would have housing, food, money, and would no longer need to wear the yellow star on their sleeves. Lies, all lies...

On the morning of March 26, 1942, the train finally arrived at an unknown place — Auschwitz. The barking of dogs, the crack of rifles, shouting, crying, gunfire. A chill ran down Regina's back, and she immediately knew this place carried nothing good. When they got off the train, hell on earth began. It was then that Regina first saw death. They marched in line behind a man pacing before them, listening to orders they dared not disobey. In despair, Regina asked herself, "Why? Why?" The woman beside her merely said, "Keep walking — you may get your answer later." Their steps halted before a gate with the inscription: *"Arbeit macht frei"* — "Work sets you free." Everywhere were brick barracks, surrounded by high barbed wire. A place where life faded away, where goodness vanished, and a name no longer meant anything. But death followed you with every step.

They were taken into a barrack — on the ground, only straw, insects, and shattered dreams. The first night was hard. Some women slept; others wept. Tears carved channels down their faces, and the sound of crying echoed through the dark night. Outside, Silvia noticed a black wall — black as the intentions of the people guarding them. Their heads were shaved; they were dressed in filthy uniforms taken from Soviet soldiers. On their feet, wooden clogs. They were stripped of identity, of womanhood. Regina was in the Auschwitz I camp and soon realized that this was not merely about labor, but about survival itself. And survival — she refused to surrender. In the wretched

conditions, she soon fell ill. Filth, hard labor, hunger. Each day she looked upon the suffering around her.

Later they were transferred to a new place — Birkenau: an extermination camp, selections, gas chambers, and furnaces. Weak people died, and Silvia hoped she would not be next. She seized an opportunity and became a nurse — an informant for the resistance — fully aware, "If they find out, they will kill me." "They will kill me anyway," she told herself, but she could not just do nothing; she refused to submit. Defiance, courage, and determination to help were her inner adornments. Many succumbed to apathy — but not her. Where even the strongest began to lose hope, she believed. She knew she had to act — and perhaps that was what saved her life so many times. Yes, it was luck, chance, connections — and the deaths of other innocents. Days of endless suffering passed, one after another. On January 18, 1945, the evacuation of prisoners from Auschwitz-Birkenau began. Only the sick and the weak remained. The march was cruel and long. Whoever lagged behind or could not go on met their end in the freezing cold.

She survived. Not as a victim — but as a witness. After returning, she decided to speak; she refused to stay silent — she had not survived for that. She spoke not to evoke pity, but because she knew that truth only has value when it is shared. "The evil that gripped us in its tight embrace was weakened by the goodness within each of us."

After the war, Regina did not return home — she no longer had one. The streets were the same, but the houses were empty. Names had faded from doors; laughter had vanished from windows. Those who once knew her avoided her gaze — some out of fear, others out of shame. She was left alone. Not because she chose it, but because the war had taken everyone from her.

Why this story? Because war also has a woman's face. It was the fate of many women who did not give up. After the war, though broken and scarred, they built homes again. Many married, gave birth to children. They bore their suffering in silence, wanting a new and better life — to make up for the one that had been stolen from them.

Regina's story is not only an echo of the past — it is a warning for the present. Today, eighty years later, the world once again teeters on the edge of great tragedy, stands over the abyss, and bathes in hatred. Society is polarized; extremism is on the rise. The war in Ukraine, the suffering and violence in the Middle East — have we forgotten?

Voices are rising that question the Holocaust, the suffering of its victims, and revive the ideologies that led to the greatest tragedies of history. But to forget is to repeat mistakes. That is why it is important to speak of what happened — not only in museums or at memorials, but also at home and in schools. Silvia survived, but millions of others never had that chance. We must be their voice. To remember does not mean to live in the past — it means to protect the future.

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