Memory Eighty Years After the War

Eighty years have passed since the end of the Second World War, and yet it feels as though it was only yesterday that I first heard about the child who was born in the midst of horror. In April 1942, just as the first transports of Slovak Jews were leaving Bardejov for extermination camps, a small boy named Arye Ephrath came into the world. He was born in the cellar of a family home, while neighbors were vanishing on trains carrying innocent people to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Try to imagine that incredible combination of joy at birth and, at the same time, the anxiety that filled the heart of his mother — Miriam, nicknamed *Manci*, and his father Shmuel. Although I did not know the answer, I knew that when such a tiny human being rests in his mother's arms in a dark, damp cellar, something more than a new life is born — a quiet, but steadfast spark of hope.

That same year, the Slovak State, under the patronage of Nazi Germany, plunged completely into racial laws and deportations. In March 1942, the first transports of Slovak Jews to Auschwitz began. Bardejov, a town with a large Jewish community, became a place of constant threat. Arye's birth in a cellar was proof that if his parents stayed in the town, they risked losing their lives — and so, with the help of the family's maid, Manci gave birth in darkness, while Shmuel stood in the forest near the house, trying to draw the attention of patrols away. At that moment, it is almost impossible for us to imagine the fear that haunted anyone who dared to shelter Jews. Yet right there, in that cellar, where the only light came from flashes of fear at the approach of guards, was born the determination not to collapse — and to protect a new life.

Only a few weeks passed before the parents realized that they could survive only by separating. Manci took her sleeping one-year-old Ari, wrapped him in a bag on her back, added sleeping drops so the child would not cry, and set out at night toward the Hungarian border. Budapest was, at that time, still relatively safe, but the danger was enormous — although the Hungarians were allies of Hitler, deportations there had not yet begun on the same scale as in Slovakia. Despite the risk, she ran into a Catholic orphanage, where she hid her son among the monks, knowing that if the police discovered she was the mother of a Jewish child, they would be deported immediately. While Manci changed hiding places among friends and acquaintances, the child waited quietly in the orphanage. This step meant the deepest separation a parent could imagine — but the life of their small boy was their only hope that one day they would see each other again.

In March 1944, however, the Nazis ended Budapest's false sense of safety. When armed units entered the city, mass deportations began there too. Manci once again risked everything and set out back toward Slovak territory, traveling with the Schöndorf family through the forests by night. They already knew that if they tried to stay in the city, they would end up on a train. They searched for salvation in remote villages, where, at times, there were still people willing to risk their own lives to help them.

In western Slovakia, in the small village of Šišov, they were taken in by an old shepherd and his wife Irena. When they heard there was a small child, they did not hesitate for a second. They offered their help — but under one condition: so that he would not look suspicious among their four children, he would have to be disguised as a girl. Arye, nicknamed *Anička* at that time, swept the straw from the floor every day and tended the sheep. Imagine it — a child with a gentle face, whose sisters sometimes rubbed red color onto his cheeks so he would blend in, so no one would see that *Anička* was in truth a little boy. Each morning he went outside, fed the baby goats, and if a patrol passed by, he returned to the barn.

Meanwhile, the parents hid in a hole beneath the floor of a neighbor's barn. In a damp, dark space made of rough planks, they spent days and nights listening to whispers, freezing — yet never stopped thinking of their son and his chance to live. Imagine their fear as they were forced to lie motionless inside that cramped space. And yet they did not give up — it is hard to describe the strength that gave them courage to endure, but the instinct to protect a single life kept them going.

In the spring of 1945, Soviet and Czechoslovak patrols entered Šišov, and the villagers finally dared to breathe again. The war was over; the parents emerged from hiding. After long months of fear and darkness, they felt fresh air for the first time. Arye, barely three years old, learned to breathe freedom again — he stopped being Anička and pretended to be what he truly was, a little boy who could run without having to change clothes. In the barnyard, all who had survived gathered: parents, children, the shepherd and his wife, and the neighbors — their tears were a mix of joy and relief, as though something new had been born from the ashes.

After several weeks of recovery in Bratislava, the family decided that their future lay across the sea. In 1946, they emigrated to the United States, where Shmuel opened a small shop in Virginia, and Manci devoted herself to raising their son. There, among wide roads and sunlit fields, Arye discovered what it meant to live without constantly looking over his shoulder. Despite the wounds of the past, he learned fluent English and became an excellent student. But he never forgot what it felt like to be held in his mother's arms, knowing that his first days of life had been filled with tears and fear.

As an adult, he decided that he would no longer remain silent. To become a witness meant not only remembering the past but passing it on. He joined the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., where he became a volunteer in the *First Person* project. Before hundreds of students, he stood and told his story — how he herded sheep one morning in Šišov, unaware that Nazi soldiers were watching him; how he greeted his village friends, not realizing that the clothes he wore would have condemned him to death by law; and above all, how he felt when, from the folds of his mother's shawl, he saw the first dawn after more than a year in darkness. In the moment he said, "I was a child who longed only for an ordinary childhood," many young people in the audience understood that history is not just a dry chapter in a textbook, but a living witness of human emotion.

On April 21, 2024, he stepped down from the stage forever — but his voice remained. Recordings of his testimony are preserved in the museum archives and in the hearts of those who listened. When I now look at the places where he once learned to live in fear, I see memorials and plaques recalling the unbearable terror of the past. But I also think of the little girl who was not really a girl, and of the determination of all those who showed him the way to freedom.

To remember Arye Ephrath today means to remember humanity. To remember the people who believed that every life has value, no matter the cost. I often ask myself: "What would I have done if I had found myself in a similar situation? Would I have had the courage to run? Would I have had the courage to hide someone else's child?" And immediately I answer myself: "Courage is not always present, but we can find it in the moment we realize that silence allows evil to grow." Today, when we read in the newspapers about new manifestations of racism and xenophobia, instead of staying silent, we can remember what happened in Šišov — how ordinary people risked their lives to save two small children. To remember means to stay alert when the minds of some people begin to close to difference. It means not only listening to a museum recording but sharing it with children and friends, because every story in which a number on the wrist was meant to be a death sentence is a challenge: *"Will you stay silent, or will you stand on the side of humanity?"*

And so, when I walk through Bardejov, where once a child with a kippah ran, I see a town transformed from a house of fear into a house of memory. I see ruined buildings reborn from tears, and I remember little Anička, the thin girl who had to be a boy. It is a reminder for me — and for you: when you once again must decide whether to stay silent while others are belittled, picture that child in the dark cellar — and realize that even a single spark can ignite the flame of humanity.

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