

A Person (Human Experience) in the Grip of Power – A Story Set Against the Background of Courage and Fear

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing."

Edmund Burke

Since time immemorial, people have desired power. But what does it mean to possess power? It is a social phenomenon understood as an individual's ability to impose their will, influence the behavior of others, and make decisions that affect their lives. Power itself is neither good nor evil. It becomes so only in the hands of those who use it as a tool to advance their own interests. It gives us what no one else can provide. Yet with great power comes great responsibility. Unfortunately, history is full of examples where power fell into the hands of individuals who were unable to wield it wisely and responsibly. At times, it gave some people a sense of security while depriving others of it. Power always carries the risk of abuse.

Power and powerlessness therefore go hand in hand. Where one person decides, another obeys; where one gains, another loses; where one commands, another resists; where one enjoys rights, another is deprived of them. Ultimately, it is a matter of character.

The phenomenon of power has not only historical significance but also social, psychological, moral, and religious dimensions. It revealed itself most fully during the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century—the Holocaust.

In the 1930s, ideas began to turn into words, and words into actions that changed the world. The carelessness and naivety of people who believed sweet promises of a better future helped a man with malicious intentions seize the reins of power and taste the possibility of victory. This did not concern Germany alone. Like an octopus, the regime gradually spread its tentacles across Europe, seeking to dominate the continent and implement the Final Solution to the Jewish Question. War became the instrument through which power was enforced, and with it came the Holocaust. Together they mercilessly shattered the certainties of everyday life and brought destruction to millions of people.

The Holocaust—as both an idea and its implementation—originated in the minds of ordinary people. They were husbands, loving fathers, and seemingly normal individuals who condemned those born as Jews to a cruel fate. *Endlösung*. They succumbed to a destructive ideology that devised a systematic, state-organized method of industrialized murder carried out in extermination camps, concentration camps, ghettos, and elsewhere. The Holocaust, together with the devastation of war itself, demonstrated with full force what can happen when evil is allowed to grow and the majority remains silent.

Yet this is not merely the story of one individual abusing power; it is the story of every society touched by war.

On March 14, 1939, the Slovak State was proclaimed under the leadership of the Catholic priest Jozef Tiso. The Slovak State was characterized as a satellite and collaborating regime aligned with fascist ideology. Its state apparatus functioned according to the German model. New laws, regulations, and decrees followed. On September 9, 1941, a government decree known as the Jewish Code was issued. Political authorities, social and religious elites, Bratislava, the regions, and ordinary people alike were, in different ways, caught in a system that contributed to the persecution and extermination of Jewish fellow citizens.

How was it possible to influence people's thinking so profoundly that they accepted and sided with evil? Today, we are relatively familiar with the facts that led to the outbreak of war; we

know its causes and consequences. However, we must continue to examine the connections and circumstances that made it possible. What role did psychology, religion, and social phenomena play? Against this background, we can see how a person may become trapped by power: external power represented by the political system and internal power manifested in the moral and religious sphere.

State power embodied an ideology built upon the suppression of constitutional and democratic principles and the violation of human rights. It led to deportations and the annihilation of 90 percent of the Jewish population.

Equally important was the social pressure people faced. Propaganda created the image of the Jew as an ever-present "enemy." The language used promoted dehumanization, making emotional detachment easier. The state gradually legitimized discrimination and spread hatred. Authorities determined what was right and wrong. Individuals were subjected to pressure that encouraged obedience, offering a sense of security and certainty. Some adapted out of fear; others were motivated by personal gain, benefiting from the Aryanization of Jewish property. Their loyalty was rewarded. After all, they too wanted to live comfortably. The letters people wrote to ministries requesting Jewish property bear witness to this reality. To some extent, all became participants in injustice.

A law was passed declaring that a human being was no longer a human being. A Jew was not a person. A person was a German, a Slovak... Is there a difference? They said there was—a great one. A German is a person. A Slovak is a person. But a Jew is nobody. Merely something that sees, hears, speaks—but above all harms and burdens society. Such a being must be destroyed like a dangerous pest, like vermin. No one cries out. No one rebels. The silence is deafening. Only some human consciences resist these inhuman commands. Yellow stars pinned to the chests of innocent people move through the streets, silently calling for help. Will anyone hear their voiceless pleas? Will anyone listen to their conscience?

Moral and religious power represented internalized values reflected in behavior and concrete actions. Here the influence of social surroundings, independent thinking, prevailing stereotypes, and fear became visible. The strength of conscience—our inner guardian—is inseparably linked to morality and religion. Here arises the conflict between obedience and courage. On one side stand social pressure, authority, and fear; on the other, moral conviction, responsibility, and courage.

"Love thy neighbor—but not the Jew!"

The yellow stars slowly disappear. Overcrowded trains depart. Houses remain empty. Neighbors vanish. In the mornings, the streets of Bardejov are silent. Ordinary people who had remained human in conscience watched in silence. Everyone read the same law. Everyone saw the same reality. Everyone faced the same question: Should I stand against this? Should I act against what I see? The question was the same for all, but each person had to answer it alone. Within their hearts, the most difficult battles were fought—battles in which no blood was shed, yet lives were decided.

Today, our task is no longer merely to identify who was the perpetrator and who was the victim. It is important to acknowledge that millions of innocent people suffered and died under horrific conditions because there were people in society who not only committed evil but also consciously collaborated and informed on others. Some simply stood by and watched. They remained silent. Yet there were also individuals in whose hearts humanity prevailed as a fundamental trait of character. Their humanity would not allow them to remain passive. They

risked their own lives, the lives of their families and children, to save others. Their stories prove that humanity does not disappear even in the darkest of times.

What, then, is this humanity that distinguished these courageous people? It is the quiet voice that tells us what is right and good even when it is difficult. It is the ability to feel another person's pain and fear, even if we have never experienced them ourselves. It is the courage to take risks even when our own lives may be endangered. It is the willingness to extend a helping hand to someone in need. It is the strength not to look away and not to remain indifferent. It is what remains human under inhuman conditions.

The question of guilt occupies a special place in both the moral and religious sphere. The philosopher Karl Jaspers devoted considerable attention to this issue, distinguishing metaphysical, political, criminal, and moral guilt. Collective guilt stood in contrast to individual guilt. The Holocaust was a state-directed, mass, industrialized system of murder. It was designed to achieve maximum efficiency and to lead to the extermination of eleven million Jews. Responsibility for this tragedy does not rest solely with politicians and officials. Ordinary people also participated in its implementation. Guilt lies not only in what a person does, but also in what they fail to do. Therefore, it is a matter of personal responsibility for every individual.

"My neighbor, why? Was my property not enough for you? Why? What did we ever do to you...?"

The story of a person in the grip of power is not merely a story of the past. It is a universal human experience that remains highly relevant today. It appears in the decisions individuals make, in the search for truth, and in our everyday choice between comfortable and safe silence and courageous civic action. This conflict between courage and fear forms one of the most important dimensions of human existence.

Great historical events do not begin with violence or on the railway ramps leading to camps. They begin with the first kick, the first insult, the first humiliation. Thoughts become words, and words become actions. The goal is dehumanization, the closing of one's eyes, and indifference. We must therefore remain vigilant whenever hateful rhetoric based on prejudice and disinformation begins to spread through society, whenever a finger is pointed at an alleged "enemy." Such perceptions of others must never become our model, for they can easily unleash waves of hatred, discrimination, violence, and fear.

The lessons of Timothy Snyder emphasize vigilance, historical awareness, and responsibility in the use of language. They encourage us to be prepared and courageous in defending rights and freedom. The history of the Holocaust reminds us that freedom is never guaranteed and that every society needs people willing to defend it—people prepared to take responsibility for their own decisions, actions, and thoughts. In conclusion, I can only agree with the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who argued that the tragedy of the Holocaust is not only that it happened, nor merely that it could happen again, but that we ourselves are capable of committing it. These words should serve as a powerful warning. The phenomenon of social pressure poses a profound risk because many people did not act out of genuine belief in the ideology, but rather as a result of their own choices.

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