

The Memory of the City and the Voices of the Past – How Bardejov Today Commemorates the Dignity of Holocaust Victims

"The Holocaust: Memory and Responsibility." These words send chills down my spine. The Holocaust—a tragic event of the past; memory and responsibility—a challenge of the present directed toward the future. This deep wound in the hearts of millions of people who lost their loved ones remains profoundly painful. That is precisely why it is important to speak about it. We must remember even the darkest chapters of our history, honor their victims, and come to terms with them. The memory of the city of Bardejov does not run from these wounds or close its eyes to them. Instead, it confronts them directly.

Fortunately, we students have no personal experience of the Holocaust. Neither do our grandparents. We know about it from films, books, testimonies, and historical accounts.

Yet I often ask myself: Can we be certain today that something like this can never happen again? Can we be sure that we will not allow evil to reveal its full power? Can we be sure that one of us will never become the target of hatred?

The legacy of this tragic period is remembered not only during commemorative days and anniversaries but also through the work of our school club, *Following the Footsteps of the Holocaust*, and through various extracurricular memorial activities.

We talk about the life of the Jewish community in our city—its culture, traditions, holidays, and religion. We talk about the life that existed before the tragic end. We discuss the fate that these people never chose for themselves. We learn about the dangers of evil and power. We analyze the causes and consequences of human decisions. We ask questions and critically examine the boundaries of morality, law, and politics. We strive to better understand the circumstances that led to the destructive events of the Holocaust.

As part of our extracurricular activities, we visit places connected to the history of our city. Bardejov was rightfully inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000. The significance of this recognition was assessed by Mr. J. Solár, a descendant of the Atlas family. The Town Hall, the Basilica of St. Giles, Renaissance houses, and the fortified walls with bastions all testify to the city's rich history. Equally important are the Holocaust memorials and the complex of buildings that form the Jewish Suburbium—the synagogue, the *bet midrash*, technical buildings, the water-retention system, the *mikveh*, and the cemetery.

For me, one of the most powerful witnesses to this history is the Jewish Suburbium. It was located outside the city walls because, for centuries, Jews were forbidden from residing within free royal towns, and Bardejov was one of them. Here, one can directly sense the tragic traces of the past. It was the center of social and religious life for the Jewish community—for children, young people, men, women, and the elderly. Gradually, they were stripped of their rights, freedom, dignity, and ultimately their lives.

When I first entered this place, I was overwhelmed by an extraordinary silence. It was not the silence of emptiness, but a silence that seemed to speak through the voices of the past. Voices of sorrow and lamentation. I felt the weight of standing where people once stood who had no

right to decide their own fate. I stand there today, saddened but free. They stood there in fear, marked, excluded from society, and uncertain of whether they would survive.

No, it is not merely a collection of historical buildings, as it may seem at first glance. It is something that allows us to make the past tangible. We preserve these monuments, restore them, and refuse to let the memory of the past fade away because the names and lives of the people who built this community still matter to us today.

Bardejov also has its own Holocaust memorial—the Garden of Holocaust Remembrance. Fourteen granite panels bear the names of 3,392 murdered individuals. Three thousand three hundred and ninety-two names, three thousand three hundred and ninety-two lives, people who suffered solely because of their ethnicity and faith.

Tears come to my eyes when I look at their birth dates. People of all ages. Tiny children. I realize how difficult it is to confront this history fully, especially because our own ancestors shared a measure of responsibility. The Hlinka Guard, emergency units, cooperation with the Nazis, collaborators—these are realities that each person must reckon with individually. Conscience can be a burden, but it can also offer relief and understanding.

As a student who has the privilege of living freely and, most importantly, living in peace, it is difficult for me to comprehend how such events could have happened.

At the center of this memorial garden stands a monument in the shape of the Star of David, placed upon railway tracks that symbolize those along which the Jews of Bardejov were deported to places from which approximately ninety percent never returned. The star is formed by two interlocking triangles. The lower section contains a steel plaque bearing the words: *"Never Again."*

During one of our visits with the school club, I found myself reflecting on this inscription. I wondered whether it is merely a wish or a genuine commitment of those of us who live here today. "Never Again" is not simply a remembrance of the past; above all, it is a responsibility to stop hatred in any form before it once again grows into tragedy.

We also uncover the stories of those who survived, and for me these stories create the deepest connection with the past. Their testimonies transform the cold stone of memorials into living human experiences. When we listen to or read their memories—memories that often seem horrifying and incomprehensible—we should pay even closer attention.

Although we know a great deal about the Holocaust today, would we truly recognize evil before it reveals itself and takes control? We, the younger generation, sometimes approach things too lightly and fail to take them seriously enough. We do not always realize that these testimonies serve as a bridge connecting the past with lessons for the future.

Their voices—quiet and broken—are the loudest warning of all. We should listen to them with respect and humility.

The Jewish Suburbium that we pass on our way to school or work reminds us of what human beings are capable of doing. For us, remembering costs nothing. For them, it cost their lives.

The voices calling to us from the past are no longer calling for help. They are calling for dignity and for the preservation of memory.

We must remember them because the responsibility for our future rests upon our shoulders.

These places are not merely reminders of the Holocaust. They possess historical and cultural significance, but today their educational value is perhaps the most important. Reflecting on the past should strengthen empathy, humanity, education about human rights, and tolerance toward those who are different from us. It should cultivate our sensitivity and awareness. It shapes attitudes grounded in democratic and ethical values.

As long as the voices of the past continue to live in Bardejov through our memory, their sacrifice will not be forgotten, and our city will remain a place of genuine respect for human dignity and for humanity itself.

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