

Interrupted Life – The Holocaust and Its Impact on the Jewish Community of Bardejov (A Testimony to the Loss of Human Dignity)

What does it mean to possess dignity? To have dignity means to recognize that each and every one of us has value and is a human being, with a name and an identity. It means having respect for oneself and for others. However, at the end of the 1930s and during the 1940s, the Nazis began to claim that Jews possessed no dignity because they were not even considered human. All of this was solely because they belonged to a different nation and a different religion. Did Jews truly lack dignity, or was it rather those who made such claims and sought to prove them through inhuman treatment who lacked it?

Let us immerse ourselves in a life story in which concrete acts of inhumanity stand in stark contrast to decisions based on profound humanity, respect, and the dignity of every individual. Such acts included assistance, empathy, solidarity, and conscience. Silvia Veselá also faced the loss of dignity. But did she truly lose it?

Silvia was born on February 6, 1923, in Bardejov. When she was only nine months old, she lost her mother. Her father remarried, and step-siblings became part of the family. She did not get along well with her stepmother. Eventually, her father agreed that she could move to Kežmarok to live with her aunt, who had no children of her own. Silvia loved her aunt dearly and helped her whenever she could. She never wanted to be a burden. She completed middle school and later attended a vocational school in Bardejov. These were happy days in the life of a young girl. Chája, Evička, Etela, Judita—her friends. Shared moments, support, and dreams of the future. She had a family, a home, and loved ones. Yet the times were slowly beginning to change.

At the beginning of the 1940s, when increasingly harsh anti-Jewish laws came into force, she secretly found employment as a nurse with Dr. Grúň in Kežmarok. There she learned basic medical procedures that would later save her life in Auschwitz.

"It was unpleasant," she used to say. "We were forbidden from going outside in the evenings. We could shop only during designated hours and walk only on one side of the sidewalk. We were not allowed into parks, cinemas, or swimming pools. Our clubs were dissolved, and we were forbidden from performing in the theatre. We were marked with the Star of David, which we had to wear in public. I gradually stopped feeling like a real human being. I began to feel that I had no value."

Who she was and who she was supposed to be was suddenly determined by others. They now controlled the lives of Jews, and the restrictions seemed endless. Yet this was only the beginning.

When Jewish girls in Prešov began to be rounded up for transports, Silvia and her friend Edita considered fleeing through Hungary to Turkey and eventually reaching Palestine, which was the dream of many young people at the time. In the end, she decided to stay, and the vision of freedom slowly faded into the unknown.

"I could not simply leave, and eventually I boarded the train as well. But what kind of train was it? We were transported like cattle."

It was a forewarning of what was to come.

In Poprad, innocent nineteen-year-old Silvia was beaten by grown men who knocked out her teeth while claiming they were serving the state and defending the Slovak nation from pests and parasites.

"They took all our valuables, and the Hlinka Guards treated us horribly. They mocked us and bullied us as if we were rats."

Human beings were transformed into rats, vermin, and insects.

The journey into the unknown followed. After several days without food or water, they arrived at their destination. The first things they heard were shouting, barking dogs, and gunfire.

"We were all terrified. We did not know where we were, what was happening, or what awaited us. After we got off the train, my uncle, Dr. Kaufmann, stepped out of another wagon. An SS commander asked him what he was doing. He replied that he was a doctor and was helping girls who needed medical care. The commander drew his gun and ordered him to carry out a selection. He was to separate the healthy and strong girls from the rest. My uncle, faithful to his profession, refused. Right before my eyes, the commander shot him. Simply because he had boarded the train to fulfill his calling."

The girls were then taken to barracks without beds. They had no idea what had happened to their families or where their loved ones were. Fear, cold, hunger, and death entered their lives. Alongside a thousand Jewish girls, a thousand German women—prisoners and prostitutes—arrived as well. The SS turned them into overseers whose task was to command and beat the girls.

"When we entered our barracks, it looked like a scene from a horror film. The floor was covered with old, filthy straw crawling with all kinds of insects. What we were given to eat was not food—it was animal feed. It consisted of rotten potatoes and the sort of things you would feed to cows. There was never enough food, and those at the end of the line often received nothing at all."

Besides the extremely hard labor, the Nazis often entertained themselves by exploiting the prisoners' suffering. They invented cruel games.

"Sometimes there were games where, if you lost, you were sent straight to the gas chamber. We literally had to fight for our lives. What saved me most was my nursing experience and the fact that I did not look Jewish. I had curly blonde hair. The Nazis occasionally asked me why I was there. But none of that changed the fact that, in their eyes, we were subhuman beings who had no right to live."

The Nazis eventually made use of her medical experience and secretly offered her a position assisting with human experiments. She accepted. It was a chance to survive.

Yet she did not allow herself to be broken. She no longer had to perform exhausting physical labor and shared a room with other nurses. At the same time, she was able to smuggle evidence of Nazi medical atrocities beyond the walls of Auschwitz through resistance networks operating within the camp. She put her own life at tremendous risk but knew it was the right thing to do.

"As for the experiments, those doctors were beasts. They did horrifying things. People were treated like laboratory mice. Many died in terrible pain and from the diseases caused by these experiments. Even we nurses had to undergo some of them, but fortunately they kept us alive because they needed assistants. Over time, we formed a close group of Jewish women. We always helped one another, spent time together, and looked after each other."

The support of the "we" sustained the individual "I."

"I remember looking through a hole in a shutter and seeing the place where executions were carried out. It did not matter whether it was a child, a man, or a woman. They shot everyone.

The wall against which they stood was black from dried human remains. Some medicines used to treat German soldiers were produced from the organs of those who had been executed."

In January 1945, Silvia was forced onto a death march toward another camp deeper inside Germany. People died from hunger, cold, or were simply shot. The only thing that kept them alive was mutual assistance and support.

For the journey, they received either a kilogram of sugar cubes or a loaf of bread. They had to share. As long as they could walk, they supported one another. Anyone who could no longer continue was shot. Humanity, of which we speak today, lived within these half-dead marching people. Silvia survived to see liberation.

When she finally returned to Czechoslovakia, the Jewish Religious Community gave her one thousand Czechoslovak crowns.

"The first thing I bought with that money was cherries. They reminded me of my childhood."

After the war, she returned to life only as "a ghost of the person she once was." The inhumanity she had witnessed and survived did not destroy her morally, but it marked her forever.

Upon returning to Prešov, she learned that her aunt, her husband, and their small children had also been deported. None of them survived. The only relatives who remained alive were her mother's brother and an aunt who had obtained false identity papers. Her uncle gave her gold teeth he had brought back from the camp. She threw them away. She could not profit from the deaths of others.

Silvia survived—but at what cost?

She remained alone for the rest of her life. At night, she was accompanied by the shadows of those with whom she had shared a common fate, a fate that could never be forgotten.

This story is only one among many. Its central theme is the loss of dignity. People in concentration camps lost their families, their names, their hair, their freedom, their property, their health, and many lost their lives. They were subjected to cruel and degrading treatment and struggled to survive with all their strength.

Those who suffered were exposed to the loss of dignity. Yet in many cases, they managed to preserve it. Dignity had been instilled in them through upbringing and faith as something precious that must be protected. They understood dignity as a moral value—the finest adornment a person can possess. It is not something that others can simply take away from us. We lose it only when we willingly surrender it.

Silvia chose active resistance, solidarity, and assistance to her fellow sufferers. In the truest sense of the word, it was those who planned and carried out this fate who lost their dignity.

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By Tomáš Kiss