

The righteous ones of Bardejov – A story of bravery and heroism

They knew what was right and didn't hesitate to act...

I've heard authors asked – where do you look for inspiration? I was surprised they all answered that they look to people. I didn't understand how such great writers could find inspiration in the average, annoying people who usually surround us. But that was before I met people whose eyes had seen the worst horrors and whose words caused goose bumps all over my body. People you would embrace and move heaven and earth for regardless of whether you knew each other at all. People who I could read about and listen to for hours and whose stories triggered an avalanche of various emotions inside of me. They are the ones who survived the Holocaust, an epidemic caused by Nazism. I realized that in every man there is an infinite amount of inspiration. You just have to open your eyes properly. Some inspire me to do good in this world. Thanks to them I believe it is still worthwhile. But others give me a textbook example of what kind of person I will never want to become. And so, I too learned to seek inspiration in all sorts of people.

However, I am often puzzled by how unstable human nature is and how easy it is to manipulate it. We nurture prejudice and stereotypes and we don't question whether our actions are correct. We are proud of our values which we cultivate in ourselves and constantly stress the importance of morality. Yet it takes only little to make everything we thought was so clear to suddenly become uncertain. And so I ask, how is it possible that during the Second World War, long-established human values ceased to apply? How is it possible that interpersonal relations were worse than those among wild animals? How is it possible that people allowed hatred and ignorance to grow in such huge proportions? Who knows... One fact in particular fascinates me. Among "people" who behaved reprehensibly there were a few who generously showed their solidarity. These were the people who realized that something bad was happening and decided not to sit on their hands and look on idly. They took the burden of responsibility and saved the lives of many people. They knew their actions couldn't change the whole world, but they changed the world of individuals by giving them a chance to survive. The remaining unanswered question is what motivated these people to help? May they be the laws of God, conscience or any

other individual motive... These people had a concrete idea about good and did not hesitate to act upon it... That is to say, they were able to distinguish good from accepted.

In the Bardejov District there were at least seven such people. Compared to the then population, this number is woefully low, but in the end we should be happy it isn't even lower. You would think that they were esteemed people whose word meant something in the town, but that is not the case. This immense bravery was mostly shown by the most ordinary people: a shopkeeper, a postman, a pastor, and a policeman. Many would be surprised that it was them who had such immense wisdom, foresight and, above all, human feelings in them. They were the proof that the most important feature of a civilization is simple human decency which, alas, many still don't have. Therefore, we should take their example and continue spreading their ideas from generation to generation. Only then will our future be better.

In a Leb Ungarov's poem he writes that he was born for his job. He wore his uniform with dignity, pride, and was not just an ordinary policeman, but also a real gentleman. Adam Bomba had his own family and four children who he needed to take care of. However, he decided to risk his life. He hid Jews in his attic and in a barn. When he was on duty at the wagons, he let them flee into the forest to save themselves. He even issued them false documents. He was assisted by his 17-year-old son. One night he helped a family through the forest to the village of Zlaté. There they found refuge with his uncle. Bomba's daughter remembered that another brother who was only eight at that time always worried about her dad. He would hope that nothing bad happened to him, that he wouldn't get shot. I can't imagine what Bomba's children had to go through and even less what he himself did. We will probably never know why he did these selfless deeds. Nevertheless, I think that it was his brave heart and faith in justice that made him do all that. And it is the people like Adam Bomba that the world misses the most today.

This policeman cooperated with another righteous man. His name was Štefan Tarcala and his name is associated with aryanization. However, not everything appears at first sight as it really is. Štefan Tarcala confiscated Neumann's cellar, but he hid several Jews in it whose lives were threatened. Every evening he would let them out to breathe some fresh air and do their natural needs. He brought them food and cared for them until the liberation of Bardejov. Until recently, I imagined a four-month stay in a cellar as quite acceptable. I imagined it as a lit room full of old junk and potatoes at my grandmother's. This vision, however, went away immediately after I entered Neumann's cellar. As someone who has had almost everything I want throughout my life,

my first thought was that I would rather get caught than have to spend four months in this place. Of course, I wouldn't want to get caught. But the inhospitable maze of underground labyrinths below the town square, the darkness, cobwebs and who knows what else lurking in the blackness, made me really unsure whether I could stay down here for even one day. After the liberation Bardejov, only 7 hidden Jews came out of the two cellars in the square.

In the fight for humanity there was another man of good deeds, the postman Jozef Kisel. He not only provided the Jews with a hiding place in his own house, but he opened mail with orders and alerted the neighborhood about further deportations. He often acted as a connection between the Jews and the policeman Bomba. It is fascinating that an ordinary postman found a way to help and not be indifferent toward people in need. Jozef Kisel was the materialization of the most important life values and that is what makes him an exceptional man whose name must be remembered.

A Greek Catholic priest Andrej Židišín from Rešov also helped. He saved the lives of several Jewish residents. He hid most of them on his own parish and selflessly offered them refuge. Among the rescued, I was touched by the story of Edmund Grossman, later Gonda. He was a dentist who was awarded a presidential exemption. His daughter and grandson remember to this day that when Andrej Židišín learned that the exemptions validity was about to expire he stopped in front of his office with horses and carriage and literally forced Edmund Grossmann to get in. He hid him on the parish in Rešov until the liberation. After the liberation, he was found by a Russian soldier who asked him who he was and what he did there. He replied that he was a Jew in hiding whereupon the Russian started to weep. When Edmund Grossmann asked the man why he cried, he replied that on the entire journey from Moscow he was the first living Jew he had seen. Thanks to Andrej Židišín, Edmund Grossman (and many others) survived for many years surrounded by his beloved family.

The good deed of Anna Koperniechova has also not been forgotten. Thanks to her, many books and important documents were preserved. She protected the synagogue by barring doors and windows and she wouldn't let anybody in. She found more courage within her than anyone else. The rest stood idly by watching the atrocities that were being committed. It mattered to her possibly more than her own life. She knew she was doing the right thing and wasn't discouraged by fear.

Shopkeeper František Gábor along with Vasil' Kyjovský also showed tremendous bravery. Both of them saved many families from certain death by providing them with shelter in their own homes. But it wasn't only about providing shelter, but also about supplying food. This was especially dangerous because the neighbors were not the type of people you would visit for a cup of coffee. If they noticed anything suspicious, they wouldn't hesitate a moment to turn you in. The advantage of a hideout in the country was the proximity to the forest, which was a quite good refuge. In the town, however, you were primarily dependent on ration tickets. If you took more food, you would automatically arouse suspicion that there were more of you at home. The consequences for committing a hostile act against the state would have been fatal. Would you be willing to take the risk for your beliefs?

The people who survived these atrocities will never forget those who kept them alive. Their saviors influenced them so much that they try to give the world something more and to live the best way they can. Thanks to the horrors of the Holocaust they are grateful even more for the little things, which the rest of us take for granted.

I am sure that in the history of mankind, there is no darker period than the Second World War. It is good that there is a lot of discussion about the events of this time. I regret, however, that nothing is being done to prevent their recurrence. You would think that the advanced humanity of the 21st century was sufficiently aware. But looking at this society, it is clear that we are going backwards rather than forward. There's demagoguery being spread among us again, which promises order, jobs and unrealistic well-being. With a little common sense we can easily decipher what these people want to pass on to the present. The gift of speech is great but only if you don't tell lies to try to turn people into ruthless savages again. I think that it is easy to point out the failing parts of the system and promise the unattainable. Young people, however, do not associate "the brown parties" with fascism, because they didn't experience it. I have never been ashamed of being Slovak. But when I watch the huge number of people in Slovakia lacking good judgment, I'm slowly reconsidering my positive attitude toward this nation.

First of all, we should all realize what was behind the rise of extremism and intolerance in the past. Seemingly innocuous "slaps" inflicted upon the Jews grew into a disaster. I will never understand how it was possible that the atrocities of the Holocaust took place before the eyes of the public. Unfortunately we must admit that there are adherents to this ideology and that there are many. I wonder, however, how many people are willing to stand up for their real values!

How is it possible that we like the idea of a radical solution? Does this mean that we are indifferent to the suffering of others? Wouldn't it bother us if small children had to hide in lice-infested bunkers? Would it be okay if they had to look at corpses around them, as long as they weren't among them? Would we be able with a clear conscience to take the carefree childhood away from them and make them become adults prematurely? Would we let them starve and live in uncertainty without remorse? Doesn't breaking up families and loss of the beloved for the sake of psychopaths horrify us? Do we have the right to start handing out slaps and gradually move on to punches? Could small children hit their peers because the parents said they were different? Yes. They could and they would. All this can happen because as people we failed once and we allowed it to happen. Let us realize that if we don't stop these things, the situation takes a dramatic turn. A faster one than we can ever imagine.

The brave from Bardejov, to whom I devoted this essay, knew very well who they were messing with and were aware of the seriousness of the possible consequences. Nevertheless, they chose good and did what they considered was necessary. They acted according to their conscience and beliefs. They were not overwhelmed by stupidity and used their common sense. And do you know why? Because the good feeling of helping others is unique and having humanity in your heart is a greater value than all the wealth in the world. It was based on this belief that they managed to change the world for many people.

It is important to discuss our values as a society. However, more importantly, is to convert these discussions into practice. We often feel that war doesn't affect us and we wonder whether we can do anything about it. And yet, all we have to do is fight the cynicism that surrounds us. It is clear that our political leadership agrees with the current situation in Slovakia. But if they don't have the courage, let us have it – the sensible portion of the population who can still think clearly. At first glance, individuals are insignificant, but we actually possess more power than it appears. Isn't there enough evidence to show you don't have to be a politician or a millionaire to change the world? All you need is courage, a good heart and common sense.

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