

Deeds of the Righteous

More than 70 years have passed since the end of the biggest armed conflict in the history of mankind. WWII claimed so many lives, regardless of their origin, age, race or religion - yet the Jewish people felt the hardest impact of the war. The majority of them were inhumanly killed in camps within days of their arrival. At the same time, while the political and social situation was worsening, there were some noble people who opened their hearts. They did not ignore the fact that thousands of innocent people were disappearing day by day. They did not stand idly by. Despite having no family ties, they were willing to help.

I would like to tell a story which should not be forgotten, a story that inspired me with its depth and spirit and highlights the unreal courage of people who saved others. Through school activities, we visited the synagogue in Košice where we met the daughter of a holocaust survivor. Here is the story she told us:

"My name is Anna Weiss. Just before WWII, I lived in the area of the High Tatras with my extended family. Our community in Kežmarok and the surrounding area was composed of approximately 1,500 people. It was a safe place for us, but in 1941 the situation changed. They started to search for us, taking our valuables and property. Soldiers were breaking windows, stores' showcases, and more. They were destroying everything that belonged to Jews. I was afraid for the safety of my family. My younger siblings were expelled from school, my mother was forced to do hard work and I had to work at a factory. I received a salary of 3 crowns, while the salary of non-Jews in the same position was several times higher. Yet, we could not complain.

We didn't lack anything until the Jewish Codex was authenticated, full of limitations and orders. One morning was different. I woke up with a strong cough and through the window I saw everyone running in the street. I looked for my parents, and found them in the kitchen packing food. Their striking answer to my question was, "We are going to start a new life. It will be better for us". All the people whose names were announced on the village radio were ordered to meet in front of the train station. From there they were supposed to travel to reach a 'better life'. Only a few suspected that the trains were headed elsewhere, that the one-way ticket would lead to neighboring Poland.

'Anna Weiss,' I heard. It gave me the chills. I didn't want to go. My home was here. My husband and I decided to challenge the order and not go to the train station. We ran to our apartment and broke everything—as a sign that the Nazis had already been there—and tried to find a safe hiding place for both of us. Suddenly, we heard the approaching steps of the Nazis. Our eyes, full of fear, met. I thought to myself, 'What now? ' The only place I could think of was our bed. I lay under the duvet and my husband hid in the wardrobe. We were holding our breath as we heard heavy steps approaching. As my knowledge of German was poor, I could hardly understand what they were saying. I was shocked when the bed cover on the right side of me folded. I was sure that this was the end for us. I stopped breathing.

Luckily, our 'visitors' were not so thorough, and I was not noticed. After a short while they left, considering the place as 'checked'.

We stayed there for two more days—in silence and with no food—until the German soldiers left the city. We were grateful for every additional second of life. We then fled through the back door to the nearby forest where we felt safer. I do not know how long wandered the woods: a few days, a week, a month... We had almost lost hope when we suddenly came across a man in hunting attire, boots on his feet, and rifle on his back.

It was nice to meet another human being after such a long time. Yet we were very scared, not knowing whether this man was our enemy. But the man kindly smiled. He took us home and invited us to lunch. His wife, an elderly lady, welcomed us, and instantly took care of us giving us everything we could wish for. This religious Catholic couple gave us everything they could, especially love and temporary feeling of safety.

Why did they risk their lives to help us? Even today, I have no clue. We were strangers and Jews, and their sons were members of the Hlinka guard. They hid us in the attic of their barn and brought food for us early in the morning during the Hlinka guard service change. Everything was smoothly planned until one day a neighbor saw our benefactors running to the barn with food. The neighbor reported it right away to the police.

The family suddenly heard noise outside their door. They were not expecting anyone. The Gestapo violently entered the house and searched everywhere, but find no sign of hidden Jews. They reported the search result to their commander who could not believe that there were no hidden Jews in the house and took our savior to questioning in Kežmarok.

Together with other gentiles who were suspected of sheltering Jews, he was questioned and tortured. Even when he was close to death he did not say anything about the two young Jews who were hiding in his house. Then, coincidentally, his son, the guard, arrived. The father was sure he was saved, despite his son's antiemetic views. Yet, once the son learned about the accusations against his father, he began beating him until the bloodied, elderly man was close to death. The son then loaded him on the car and threw him in front of their house. Afraid of his mother's reaction, he knocked on the door and ran away. The elderly woman opened the door, horrified to see her beaten husband bleeding and hardly breathing. She managed to put him in bed and ran to tell us what happened. Medical assistance was almost null back then, as medicine was inaccessible. Coincidentally, my husband was a medical student. and ignoring the risks he went to the city to get supplies to treat and save our protector. But by the time he came back, our savior was already dead.

At that moment we realized that an innocent person had died because of us. He was the one who took us in, offered us a roof above our heads, and it was thanks to him that we were alive. As the war and persecution of Jews continued, his wife continued to protect us. She didn't blame us for the loss of her husband because she knew that he had died in an act of kindness. Thanks to her, we managed to start a new life. None of our relatives survived and she became our family, our mother."

Many of these sad historical events are often remembered only through the survivors of these horrors. Yet we should not forget those who had the courage to face injustice, risking their lives to save innocent people. Their courage and fearless actions, their belief in the good of people and the power of moral laws should become an example for us to admire and remember. The omnipresent fear which dehumanized people highlights even more the merit of those who didn't defraud their humanity, and who didn't surrender to the fear. This story is not simply a mirror to the past that must not be forgotten; we, the young generation, cannot assume that these events could not repeat themselves.

Last but not least, I would like to highlight the actions of Bardejov citizens, non-Jews awarded by the title 'Righteous among the Nations': A. Bomba, a policeman and hunter who knew the woods and took many people through them into safety; Š. Tarcala, a builder who acquired the store of a Jewish man named Neumann, then hid Neumann's family and other Jews in the cellar; K. Kisel, a postman with access to letters addressed to the government with the names of those

to be deported to Auschwitz. He notified Jewish families so that they could flee or hide; V. Kyjovský, who sheltered Abraham Grusgott in his house for some time. And what about you? Would you risk losing your life to accept persecuted strangers into your home? Would you disclose their names if you were tortured? We should never forget that these horrible incidents of persecution and injustice have not yet disappeared.

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