

THE FOREST OF THE RIGHTEOUS

Abstract

by "The Gardens of the Righteous Worldwide Committee"

THE GARDEN OF THE RIGHTEOUS

The memory of Good, conceived and accomplished in extreme circumstances, can be found in Israel next to the monument commemorating the victims of the Shoah. This is the Garden of the Righteous, in which a tree has been planted in honour of every person who opposed Nazi atrocities to testify that even in the worst circumstances, in which murder has become the law of the land and genocide is part of a political project, it is always possible for all human beings to make an alternative choice. As Hannah Arendt observes, "you can always say yes or no". Even in the darkest hours no individual's fate is preordained, history can always be pushed in the opposite direction.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EXEMPLARY STORIES

By remembering the stories of the Righteous we can prevent a history marked by heinous crimes from being the exclusive province of the architects of wickedness and violence.

All too often, History with a capital H pays little attention to those who, despite never winning a decisive battle, have at least tried to turn the tide in another direction. In the end, the tale told therefore dwells only on a tragic course of events set in motion by executioners in pursuit of their victims.

According to the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, it is up to us "in the midst of our calm existence, to acknowledge such acts (of dignity, altruism, creativity), to give them their true value and to encourage them." These deeds, performed in extreme circumstances, shall act as a model for our "daily morals", founding them on the "acknowledgement of the fact that both good and evil are equally easy". Indeed, human beings, Todorov says, "are neither good nor evil by nature, or else they are both one and the other: egoism and altruism are equally innate... Evil is not accidental, it is always there, ready to rear its ugly head. It's enough not to do anything for it to emerge. Good is not an illusion, it manages to exist even in the most discouraging circumstances."

This is our premise in proposing a conference on the Righteous of our century: not to look for "Absolute Good" by exorcising Evil, nor to create saints or heroes struggling against demons and monsters, but to understand the way for men and women not to mislay their own humanity.

THE EXPERIENCES OF THE RIGHTEOUS

There is no clear-cut definition of the concept of righteousness.

It can be stated, however, that the outstanding feature of the Righteous is their ability first and foremost to feel and then to think according to their conscience, following the universal morality of human rights.

For example, there have been people who, although not persecuted themselves, because they were in the persecutors' camp or in the variegated and many-sided camp of the onlookers of radical evil, have seen fit to take the side of the victims and to move in various ways to try to secure their salvation.

As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas affirms, even in the direst circumstances, such people have read the appeal in the faces of their fellow creatures, and have heeded that summons to responsibility, which is the fundamental and indispensable attribute of human existence.

Well, whoever managed to recognize these ideological and imaginary fabrications at conception and make a stand against the racial laws, against the invention of ethnic and social enemies, against words demonizing their fellows, represents the first spark of resistance against possible crimes against humanity. Whoever succeeded in doing that not only realized that it was man's dignity that was at stake, but also managed, with extraordinary foresight, to envisage the possible consequences of this build-up of hatred.

The context of such people's actions and reactions is society as a whole. The Righteous are not only those that save the lives of other human beings from ethnic groups threatened with genocide, but also those who intervene in the name of truth, against attempts to delete all trace of misdeeds or to distort the real terms of evil events and the responsibilities of their perpetrators.

The Righteous are those who oppose any attempt to delete remembrance; those who testify against cruelty despite belonging to the "group" guilty of the crime they wish to report; those who are capable of questioning their own convictions and past decisions when faced with the negative consequences that these have on other human beings; those who take a public stand and denounce such crimes in a hostile environment.

Evil seen from a distance appears easy to understand, to comprehend, but if you immerse yourself in the context in which genocides or genocidal massacres have taken place, you realize that it was not simple at all to take a stand, or even to become sensitive to the pain of the victims. Those who sided with them had to stand up against a general consensus, or fight against that particular wall of hypocrisy that leads men to remove the evil inflicted on their own kind from their conscience. Thus, precisely when evil is being perpetrated and programmed, a denial mechanism is triggered. People maintain that it's just not true, it's a pack of lies and the victims themselves become the guilty party. The conscience is side-tracked in other ways so that people can set their minds at rest, find justification for saying that they can't do anything about it.

Hannah Arendt pointed out how, under totalitarian regimes, ordinary people, who would never dream of committing crimes themselves, docilely and effortlessly come to support a system in which such crimes become "normal" behaviour.

In extreme situations in which the architects of violence have succeeded in creating a "thought-free" environment and a collective climate of self-deception, a righteous person is one who, first and foremost, manages to think freely and has the strength of mind to question his own conscience, disputing conformism and the rules in force around him.

This path to resistance can be followed in various ways. It can also be found when Evil has already been perpetrated, and here the righteous are moved, not out of conviction, foresight or imagination, but by the compassion aroused by hearing and seeing with their own eyes the suffering of their fellow men. They act out of compassion, rediscovering their capacity to think at the very last moment. The Turkish prefect of Aleppo, Naim Bey, the Italian Giorgio Perlasca, the German soldier Schmidt belong to this category. Others like them have still to be discovered and their stories told.

In this case the Righteous are those who manage not to be conditioned by the process of dehumanizing the victims or those who, even in the extreme situations of the concentration camps, succeed in recognizing their fellow man and try to rescue him.

You would think that the more a person is humiliated, depersonalized, reduced to a pure abstraction, the more the human conscience should rebel and the easier it should be to show solidarity towards him. But in fact, the experience of totalitarian regimes has proved exactly the opposite: the Nazi and the Stalinist regimes succeeded in getting society to accept the annihilation of millions of people precisely because they first eradicated the basic semblance to humanity from their victims. Thus they not only made it easier for the executioners to fulfil their final task, but they managed to wither all forms of human compassion in society at large. They even broke down the feelings of mutual solidarity between the persecuted themselves.

This was the particular and dramatic condition of the Righteous who, finding themselves inside the concentration camps and gulags, where brutal repression suffocated any form of solidarity among the victims and where an infernal struggle for survival was created, somehow managed to keep the torch of human dignity burning and tried to help the other inmates.

In such extreme situations, good deeds can hardly be seen as spectacular events, when a man abruptly manages to change the course of history, or a guard suddenly saves the lives of tens of people condemned to death. Nevertheless, small gestures in defence of human dignity take on a special value in such a context and must be documented and awarded their due value.

RECONCILIATION

The men and women who with their deeds have said "no" to the crimes of their States and nations, and who have recognized the sufferings of their fellow creatures and have gone to their aid, take on an unexpected task. They often become the go-betweens for reconciliation between the victims of violence and the peoples who have persecuted them. They are able to break the chain of hatred, hatred that can explode between two

ethnic groups who find themselves on opposite sides of the barricade in the dynamics of genocide.

The Avenue of the Righteous, which came into being almost by chance in Jerusalem after the war, has helped to reconcile many Jews with those countries where, in the course of the Second World War, they had been betrayed, persecuted, annihilated.

The stories told by those hundreds of trees have enabled many Jews to return to Germany, Hungary, Poland and Lithuania, causing them to remember their jailers, but also allowing them to rediscover other faces, other people.

Today too it is feasible, for example, to imagine that in the tragic aftermath of ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, the memory of those who in the Serbian, or Croatian, or Muslim camp tried to save lives on the other side could help to propose a framework for a new, multi-ethnic community. A Kosovan might perhaps manage to overcome the trauma suffered at the hands of the Serbs if he were to hear about a citizen of Belgrade who made a gesture of support towards the Kosovan people.

A GARDEN FOR ALL THE RIGHTEOUS OF OUR CENTURY

Despite the extraordinary universal moral message of the Garden of Jerusalem, the idea of paying homage to the Righteous has so far been confined exclusively to the memory of the Shoah. Neglecting to do this may be due to our failure to comprehend that the 20th century has been a century of endless genocide, beginning with the annihilation of one and a half million Armenians in the deserts of Mesopotamia, followed by millions of deaths in Stalin's gulags and in the Chinese countryside, the staggering extermination of almost 6 million Jews in the gas chambers and then by new genocides in Cambodia and in Rwanda, and moving to its conclusion with the ruins of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor.

As well as overdue ethical reflections it is proving difficult to set up an internationally recognized, legal framework of reference to define the concepts of genocide and of crimes against humanity perpetrated by a state.

Difficulties at an international level, however, do not only concern defining such crimes against humanity, but especially the possibility of bringing their perpetrators to justice in an international court. Today, in fact, despite the end of the cold war, there is still considerable reluctance to setting up an international body that would systematically and automatically take the place of national courts in trying the suspects of these crimes. Most countries fear that it could be prejudicial to their own national sovereignty.

On the other hand, not even civil society has been able to play a stimulating role in this direction. Philosophers, politicians and intellectuals have never thought of generalizing the experience of Jerusalem and envisaging a worldwide Garden commemorating the experiences of all those men and women of our century who have tried to react to crimes against humanity. They have never considered that for each circumstance in which the flowers of evil have blossomed, examples of human resistance should also have been highlighted, not only after the event, but while it was actually in progress.

Planting a tree for a "righteous" person means making a symbolic gesture for that person not to be left alone.

With the conference we are proposing we wish to start planting these trees.

This is why we would like to propose planting a Garden for the Righteous in all the places that became symbols of totalitarian persecution in the course of the 20th century, but which numbered among their protagonists not only the perpetrators of evil, but also the righteous men and women who opposed them: Erevan in Armenia, in memory of those who refused to accept the 20th century's first genocide; Moscow, in honour of those who refused to submit to the systematic degradation of Man in the soviet gulags; Sarajevo, the city that became a symbol, first of peaceful coexistence between different cultures and ethnic groups and then of the most ferocious ethnic hatred, so as not to forget those who have continued to believe in respect for their fellow men in the whole of the former Yugoslavia, in Bosnia and in Serbia too, in Montenegro and in Kosovo, regardless of ethnic backgrounds; in Rwanda, in Cambodia, in Latin America.

All these gardens would thus contribute to creating an ideal "world-wide garden", with trees stretching their roots all over the world, as an admonition and a lesson for future generations.

PREPARATIONS FOR AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The aim of the international conference, due to be held in Milan in 2001, is to take a first concrete step towards achieving this exacting target. For this purpose a committee is currently being formed, in order to promote some preparatory actions on the individual issues to be discussed at the conference and to propose the formation of individual Gardens of the Righteous in various different places.

A conference on the 1915-16 genocide in Armenia is being planned for the end of this year, promoted by the Cultural Department of the Padua City Council and by the University of Padua.

Another meeting, for which contacts are under way with representatives of the Memorial group and of the Sakharov foundation in Moscow, will enquire into the gulag experience.

A third event is scheduled to focus on the former Yugoslavia and the symbolic city of Sarajevo.

We have approached various universities about the possibility of organizing a debate of a more theoretical kind, to discuss the philosophical-moral issues associated with the figure of the Righteous in the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, starting from the reflections of philosophers such as Hannah Arendt and Tzvetan Todorov.

PROMOTION COMMITTEE

The following people, among others, have pledged their support:

Antonia Aslan, University of Padua

Enzo Bettiza, writer

Augusto Camera, historian

Francesco Cataluccio, essayist

Riccardo Chiaberge, journalist

Julia Dobrovolskaija, University of Venice

Umberto Galimberti, University of Venice

Piero Kuciukian, president of the Council of the Armenian Embassy in Italy

Stefano Levi della Torre, essayist

Mimmo Lombezzi, journalist

Agopik Manoukian, sociologist

Carlo Massa, film director

Emil Mirzakhanian, art dealer

Salvatore Natoli, University of Milan

Gabriele Nissim, essayist

Ernesto Olivero, director of the Sermig Centre, Turin

Rosita Tordi, IULM Milan