

The moral sovereignty of the Righteous

by *Konstanty Gebert*

In 1993 I accompanied Marek Edelman to Sarajevo. We had organized a humanitarian aid convoy, Marek had heard about it and had decided to come with us. I didn't think it was a very good idea: he was already quite elderly, the route was both tricky and risky, but Marek said: "Listen, in war a doctor is always useful". He was a doctor and could not be dissuaded.

That train then failed to reach Sarajevo, it was stopped at the Croatian border, but Marek's decisiveness was completely consistent with everything he had ever done. It had led him, as a prisoner of the Ghetto, to organize the armed revolt and become deputy in command of the Ghetto uprising; then to protest against the Communist regime imposed on Poland and later it had cost him a jail sentence following the Jaruzelski-led coup in December 1981. I believe this is a fundamental aspect of what motivates the Righteous.

As another Righteous person, the Polish poet Anthony Suminski, said: "If you have doubts, do the decent thing: it works".

The Righteous are motivated by a moral sovereignty that prevents them from behaving wickedly. They are not necessarily nice or kind. We should not forget that in Poland – a country that boasts a third of the over six thousand Righteous people acknowledged by Yad Vashem – many of these figures were actually anti-Semites. As reported in Carla Tonini's biography, recently published in Italy, the great Polish writer Zofia Kossaz-Szczucka had launched an appeal to help the Jews in the Polish underground press. This despite the fact, as she wrote, that: "they are still enemies of Poland and enemies of the faith, but it is morally impossible not to help them because failing to do so would place us firmly on the side of the murderers".

The Righteous had many different reasons for behaving the way they did. They were righteous because they were Catholics, they were righteous because they were atheists, they were righteous because they were Communists, they were righteous because they were right wing. But such reasons are not particularly relevant. What **was** important was that they all felt obliged by their moral sovereignty: "I cannot do otherwise". And this features in all genocides, not only the Holocaust. I find it among the "Good men in evil times" mentioned by Johan Kadros in his wonderful book, among the Hutus of Rwanda who rescued Tutsis – I am working on that genocide and I have spoken with them at length. They all said more or less the same thing: "It was impossible to do otherwise".

It was not that they could not behave differently because social pressure required them to do the right thing. Quite the opposite. They could not do otherwise because they felt compelled to keep their moral sovereignty intact, and this is important. It is important because we have to understand that the perpetrators of genocides consider themselves moral beings. They consider their work to be right and justified. They do not kill for pleasure like the perpetrators of simple massacres. They kill out of a profound moral conviction that the world will be a better place if there are no longer any Jews or Tutsis or Kulaki or Bosnians, that there are groups whose very existence is wrong and that by killing them this wrong will be put right. They do not enjoy it at all – I have spoken at length with those responsible for the Rwandan genocide, who used terms such as "going to work", who spoke of killing people as if it were a job, a tough, unpleasant one, but one that had to be done. Against such rationale, often supported by the State, by the media, by the way people have been brought up, there is little that can be done. Only our moral sovereignty can prompt us to say no. And let's not deceive ourselves. We have repeated: "Never again, never again" like a mantra. The American journalist David Rieff, in a book on Bosnia wrote that, since Sarajevo, since Srebrenica, we have known exactly what "never again" means. It means "Never again will Germans murder

Jews during the Second World War". Nothing more than that. And after Bosnia comes Rwanda, and after Rwanda Darfur...

Genocide is simple, something that can be organized and carried through to its completion. Only the moral sovereignty of the Righteous can prevent such a process. This is why the Gardens of the Righteous commemorate different people. Not everyone risked their lives. Wladislaw Bartoszewski, whom Ulianova Radice mentioned in her talk, risked death by rescuing Jews in Poland during the Second World War. But when he opposed Communism he risked jail, not death. So the two things are different, although the motivation was the same: the compulsion to do the right thing. The Righteous told themselves: "If I have doubts, I'll opt for the decent thing".

This is why I feel that it is essential to commemorate the Righteous, to demonstrate the power of Good and how it works, if we are not to repeat David Reef's observation, replacing Sarajevo and Srebrenica with the names of other towns.

Genocide is the 20th century's tragic contribution to the history of mankind. Let us hope to make our own contribution by opposing genocide with method, with a method that can safeguard both moral sovereignty, and also hope in a world in which genocide will never happen again.

In Poland, my grandfather was saved by Polish peasants; at that time my mother was a soldier in the Polish army in Russia. She fought weapons in hand for my right to live, she won and she guaranteed me that right. But it would not be worth living in a world in which only my mother's machine gun can guarantee my right to exist. The Polish peasants that saved my grandfather, saved a world in which life is worth living.

It seems to me that this moral obligation is common to all of us. We cannot allow ourselves to forget that genocide remains a latent possibility, that it is easy to carry out and that against genocide the only method that appears to work is moral sovereignty, such as that of the Righteous. Thank you.