

Europe should set a good example

interview to Marek Halter

D: What led you to the decision to deal with the Righteous?

I myself was rescued by some Catholics at the beginning of 1941 when my family and I managed to escape the Warsaw Ghetto. 50 years later I directed a movie about rescues, which is the first movie about the Righteous. The movie was presented in Berlin and in Toronto.

I toured all European countries and interviewed all living Righteous by asking them very simple questions like “Why have you done what you have done?”.

I did it because I think it is necessary to fight Evil, but it is very difficult to do so without examples of Good. Dealing with the Righteous means showing the world that fighting Evil is possible, through examples. It is possible to be different. It is possible not to kill. One question I still ask myself is why did I wait to realize this movie for 50 years when the majority of the Righteous, including Giorgio Perlasca, were very old and some of them were dead.

Anyway I wrote a book, “The Power of Good”, based on this movie, and in the end I feel it is even more important to talk about the Righteous than to denounce the Evil. Auschwitz is there, everybody can see it. But few see examples of Good. Furthermore it is difficult to involve people doing the Good while blaming their ancestors for crimes, killings and destruction. It is better to say: “I know a Catholic, a Protestant, a secular and so on who has done a great deal of good by rescuing someone”. This could be a good way to remember history, and nowadays one of my aims is to introduce the subject “History of the Righteous” into schools in France. Maybe we will discuss this proposal also in Italy at the WE FOR conference.

D: What is the topicality of the Righteous topic nowadays in France?

The Righteous are very important in France. Here there was one side which belonged to the Vichy government, who were the fascists and the people who participated actively to the deportation of Jews. On the other hand, there were also those who tried to save them. The Jews in France were 300,000 before the war, 200,000 after it. It is the highest proportion of rescued Jews in Europe, which means there were many Righteous who, exactly like the Vichy people and police, were normal people, not intellectuals. It is very important to show they were the same kind of people on both sides when they saved and when they persecuted the Jews, which means one who was doing the latter had no excuses. It is impossible to say “I had no choice”. The Righteous provide a fantastic example of this also because the Jews are a barometer of the possibility of humanity.

D: Did your writings spark a debate on the subject of the Muslim Righteous? Is it still a taboo to talk about the Muslims who rescued the Jews?

No, it isn't. The Muslim Righteous show the Arab world that the Holocaust has existed, that the Jews were killed. The Jews will survive only if the world is with them.

I remember that after the screening of my film at Haifa's festival of cinema, a debate had taken place between Israel's president Ezer Weitzman and Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin. The former had declared that if I had been able to find thirty-six Righteous for my film (the number needed to save the world, according to the Talmud), it only meant that there were not more of them. Itzhak Rabin simply replied that the Jews needed to learn to say thanks.

D: What do you think can be the role of the Righteous in the construction of the European identity?

An essential feature of European identity should be, but often isn't, the respect of the minorities, the different cultures and traditions. Europe is currently not working well because we don't know, we

don't respect, we even reject the minorities. For example the Belgians have problems with the Moroccans, the French with the North-Africans, Germany with the Turks. A fantastic example of this mentality is the poem by Martin Niemoeller, the Protestant who resisted Nazism. Niemoeller wrote:

First they came for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up,
because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up,
because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak up,
because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me,
and by that time there was no one
left to speak up for me.

And this provides a fantastic example of the risks Europe is running.

D: What can be the antidote?

Of course, the Righteous. When I interviewed them about the reasons why they had decided to save people at the risk of their life, they all appeared surprised: for them doing it was normal. It was normal to immediately help those who were in need. This Goodness can be at anybody's level if they have been shown the example; Europe's identity and mission might be that of showing this example to the world. This can be done through Education and, maybe I will propose it in Milan, it would make sense to ask the European Commission to establish a Day of the Righteous. A Holocaust Remembrance Day still exists, now it is time we had a day to commemorate the Righteous.