

Vasilij Grossman, my father

by Fedor Guber

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Ladies and Gentlemen!

I am delighted to be here, at the Milan Garden of the Righteous, to unveil the memorial stone in honour of Vasily Grossman. Vasily took the place of my real father, who had been shot, and became a marvellous father to me, and one to whom I owe all the best in me.

Vasily Grossman was a genuinely Righteous man. For his fellows, for their safety and security he was always eager to sacrifice his freedom and even his life.

Together with ordinary people, he had suffered all the vicissitudes of war and had felt sorrow for the death of millions deep within his heart. With the Soviet troops he entered the Treblinka extermination camp where he became a witness to the massacres perpetrated by the Nazis. Afterwards, as if inspired by his bleeding heart, he wrote *The Hell of Treblinka* in which he recounted everything he had seen. His book has been read by millions in a host of different languages. *The Hell of Treblinka* became an official piece of accusatory evidence in the Nuremberg trials. It was used to charge the Nazi-Fascist generals with genocide against the Jewish population.

When the war was over, Vasily Grossman helped Il'ja Erenburg to compile the *Black Book*, a detailed account of the genocide of the Jewish population during World War Two based on many pieces of testimony. This book has been translated into numerous languages, including Italian.

In 1960 Vasily Grossman completed his great book *Life and fate*, one of the best novels of the Twentieth century. Man's unstoppable yearning for freedom, which makes him incompatible with tyrants, had frightened the Communist regime and in 1961 the book was banned and the manuscript seized from Grossman's flat. Thus he wrote to Nikita Khrushchev, the President of the Communist party: "My current situation, that is to say my physical freedom, has neither meaning nor truth as the book to which I have devoted my entire life is in jail. As I did before, I believe I have written nothing but the truth, cherishing people and believing in man ...". Following the seizure of his book, Grossman fell ill and died of an incurable disease some years later.

In his final years, on his return from the Gulag, he wrote the short novel *Forever flowing*. In it he depicts the reality of the Stalinist regime and the genocide that the Communists carried out against their own peasant class in the 1930s, which left over 5 million people dead.

Vasily Grossman's entire life earned him a place here, in the Milan Garden of the Righteous.