

PREFACE

of the book about “The Righteous in the Gulag”
by *Gabriele Nissim*

A NEW CATEGORY: THE RIGHTEOUS AGAINST A GENOCIDE

Applied within the context of a totalitarian regime charged with crimes against humanity, the term *righteous* is not always immediately understood. A similar epithet suggests a person who has always behaved in an exemplary fashion and who has lived their life in a spirit of total abnegation with respect to their fellows.

Alexander Daniel smiled when his father Yuli was defined as *righteous* due to the moral fortitude he had shown during the trial in the USSR, in which he had refused to confess. “My father fought for the right to freedom of speech and for human dignity, but he was far from being a saint”, he emphasized¹.

Alexander is well aware of the example that his father set in the struggle against the lies and abuse of power that prevailed in Brezhnev’s Russia and is ready to argue with anyone who underestimates his father’s role in the birth of the opposition movement, but he refutes any suggestion that Yuli Daniel strove for moral excellence throughout his life.

And if we consider some of the generally accepted definitions of ‘righteous’, we can understand his surprise.

The immediate association prompted by the word *righteous* is with the Christian martyrs who dedicated their entire lives, right through to the extreme sacrifice, to the service of God and to the love of their fellow men. A modern example of this kind of dedication is Maria Teresa of Calcutta, who devoted her life to caring for the sick amongst the lowest of the low and was elevated by the media to an almost unattainable symbol of altruism and absolute goodness.

Moreover, this is still the prevailing idea in Russia today, as Anatoli Razumov, the tireless promoter of the “Levasovo Memorial Cemetery” observes:

“ For us, the righteous are pious people who have pursued the ideal of a pure and upright life and for this have been sanctified by the Orthodox church. We have never associated such figures with dissidents because dissidents were unlikely to have been the sort of people who never sinned. It is no coincidence that Soviet dictionaries added the word “ironic” to this definition because, under the

¹ See Alexander Daniel’s report, *The Sinjavskij-Daniel’ case: the psychological revolution of 1965-1966*.

totalitarian regime, this category was frequently the object of scorn. The righteous were not politically motivated, but were simply people who opposed evil by praying and by leading an upright life. This is why the word 'righteous' caused some of the Russian delegates at the conference to smile, because they found it an improbable attribute for famous opponents of the Soviet regime"².

Secondly, the word 'righteous' is associated with those who have consistently stuck to their principles throughout their lives. Socrates accepted his death sentence, despite professing his innocence, not to contradict the verdict of justice but because he was convinced, like so many other ancient Greek philosophers, that there was no sense in moral teaching unless a man's own life consistently reflected his principles, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. Righteousness thus suggests total consistency between words and deeds, between life and work, intentions and results, and it is difficult for us to accept the idea that a man who has experienced evil and led a life full of contradictions can be righteous.

The third image suggested by the term comes from the tradition of the Old Testament. In the Bible, God agrees to let Abraham save the corrupt and crime-ridden cities of Sodom and Gomorrah from destruction, as long as he can find at least ten righteous men amongst their inhabitants. This tragic condition, which cannot be fulfilled and thus condemns the two cities, teaches us two extraordinarily up-to-date lessons.

First, not to generalize (the whole population is guilty because a gang of criminals holds power) and always to distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, however desperate the circumstances.

Second, that the righteous have the power to redeem a society ravaged by evil, and can thus restore justice among those who have abandoned their primordial essence.

This is why men should never despair of changing the course of events, however dire the circumstances. A superhuman effort must be made – with the strength Abraham begged God for – to search everywhere for exceptions.

The definition of the Book of Proverbs is thus highly appropriate: a righteous man is the foundation of the world. He is a pillar that bears the weight of all humanity with his exemplary behaviour. He is the spark for a new beginning even in dark times. He is the exception that can lead to the miracle of redemption. But as Abraham realized, the deeds of the righteous achieve fulfillment when there are people with the

² Personal letter from Anatoli Razumov to the author.

strength and the wisdom to recognize them. In conclusion, if righteousness goes unheeded, it will be lost.

It could be observed that in extreme situations (wars, stand-offs, retribution), the righteous are not only the people who behave differently but also those, on the other side of the barricade, who are ready to listen to their case.

The Bible is not clear, however, about the features that should distinguish the righteous. Are they those who devote themselves to prayer and to obeying religious precepts? Those who strive for consistency and moral excellence? Those who fight for the triumph of justice in the world? Or are they those whose compassion for their fellows prompts them to act – as Lévinas suggests – and who respond to the other man's sense of justice.

In 1953, the State of Israel passed a law instituting the duty of national remembrance for the victims of the Nazi persecutions. With this, the term “righteous” took on a completely new ethical dimension, as unforeseeable as the fate of world Jewry had been during World War II. This re-elaboration of the term stemmed from the shattering realization that the world had simply stood by without a murmur while Jews were massacred in their millions, and that only a precious few non-Jews had tried to keep the spark of humanity alive.

The righteous were, in fact, those few non-Jews who had accepted their own individual responsibility as regards the genocide and had done their best to save Jewish lives at the risk of their own.

The definition thus concerned the ethical choice made by an individual when faced with a crime against humanity perpetrated by a State. In almost all cases this choice had not been enough to change the course of history or stop the genocide, but it remained as a milestone to remind us that every man has the option of helping the persecuted within his own private sphere.

Those who had concealed Jews in their own homes, for example, could not hope to put an end to the racist laws or halt the extermination machine on their own, but they had anyway shown that it **was** possible to achieve a result by shouldering responsibility themselves.

By contrast, those who chose to avoid the risks involved often justified their failure to help in any way by claiming that to achieve any results on a general scale was impossible: despite wanting the persecutions to end, they had been unable to stop them and had therefore done nothing. The impossibility of affecting the general course of events became an alibi for inaction in their own individual sphere of responsibility.

The innovative moral teaching of remembering the righteous lies precisely in this revelation: whenever politics fail and the institutions allow a crime against humanity to become law, whenever international bodies and public opinion turn a deaf ear to the fate of the victims, an individual can still act within his own personal sphere of influence (no matter how limited) and raise his own little barrier against Evil.

This was the fundamental tenet of Hannah Arendt's entire philosophical research, following the shock of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961.

How can a human being find within himself the resources³ to think and act alone, when prevailing thought leads an entire society to believe in the "moral" value of genocide?

This was the question that prompted her to write *The life of the mind*. Hannah Arendt investigated the possibility of resistance on the part of a single individual in an emergency situation.

The righteous had shown, amazingly, how some people have the moral fortitude to set themselves outside the spirit of their time, to act alone, to "save the world" within their own sphere of competence.

Remembering these individuals gave the post-war generations a message of great personal responsibility.

Since we cannot rule out the possibility of some fundamentalist ideology taking hold again and even becoming law in some major country, the only antidote remains individual resistance.

In such circumstances, an individual may find himself with a completely unexpected task on his shoulders, involving great responsibilities: the defence of human civilization, in dangerous solitude. The moment an individual ceases to sense his fellow men as part and parcel of himself and remains indifferent to their elimination, or even considers it necessary for his own happiness, then human civilization dies.

On this basis you will appreciate how the righteous are no longer just the figures of moral excellence indicated by the Bible or by the New Testament, or perceived by Alexander Daniel in his essay, but rather those who refuse to renounce their membership of the human race and, as a result of some mysterious and indecipherable mechanism, are incapable of stifling their profound compassion for their fellows.

The debate facing the Yad Vashem Commission⁴ in Jerusalem – the first institution in the world to define and elaborate this category of men – focused on two basic issues:

³ Hannah Arendt, *La vita della mente* [The life of the mind], Il Mulino, Bologna, 1987, p. 86.

Were the men and women to be honoured as righteous those who had acted heroically, had proven they were untainted by evil and had saved human lives for selfless reasons? Or was the Commission to adopt a broader view and focus on the value of their actual deeds, accepting the rescuers, whoever they might be, with all their human contradictions?

Many people, including the judge of the Supreme Court of Israel, Moshe Landau, thought that the righteous should be moral examples without a single stain on their character.

Honouring a man like Oskar Schindler, who had espoused Nazism and had exploited free Jewish labour for his own benefit, was out of the question. Landau did not belittle Schindler's efforts to save his own workers' lives, but thought it was important to consign to collective memory those who had tried to help the Jews for lofty moral reasons and whose exemplary behaviour had been consistently beyond reproach.

Another Supreme Court judge, Moshe Bejski, on the other hand, vigorously opposed this approach: he had understood that a political plan to eliminate human beings forces us to radically adjust our hierarchy of values. It does not matter how a man behaves in general, whether he is respectable or not; what matters is his reaction to the value of human life. Anyone who had tried to defend a single life, albeit that of a rogue, an unfaithful husband, a thief, a prostitute or a hardened Nazi, was to be honoured along with the others. Bejski considered it a mistake to look for moral perfection in a rescuer, or total abnegation, absolute heroism, or crystalline innocence as regards the Nazi project. Although the definition may not sit easily, a righteous person is in fact someone who refuses to surrender his human quality, despite the considerable risks involved.

The second objection has never been formulated officially, and appears almost in contrast with the spirit of the commission itself.

Many wondered whether the commemoration of the righteous would make people forget the silence and inertia of the international institutions as regards the massacre of the Jews. This fear was particularly heartfelt amongst the survivors, who were anguished by the thought that the rescuers could serve as a potential whitewash for the world's indifference to the Holocaust. If the issue of the righteous was not dealt with in a balanced way, the few "good people" would wipe out the sea of indifference. In the Jewish world, the trauma caused by the silence of the democratic nations, witnessed by the fruitless meetings between the emissary of the Polish resistance, Jan

⁴ Gabriele Nissim, *Il Tribunale del Bene*, Mondadori, Milan, 2004, p. 112.

Karski, the British secretary of state Anthony Eden and the American president Roosevelt, is still an open wound.

Amnon Rubinstein – one of the best-known contributors to the daily newspaper Ha'aretz – recently reiterated this fact when recalling the failure of the Evian conference held in June 1938, shortly after Germany's annexation of Austria. The conference had been convened to discuss the Jewish refugee situation but clamorously failed to find a solution⁵. All the countries involved, with the exception of the Dominican Republic, announced that they would close their borders to Jewish refugees. The Australian delegate went as far as to declare that since anti-Semitism did not exist in his country, he had no intention of importing it by letting the refugees in.

The resolution of the conference was indicative of the climate in which it had taken place. It was asserted that the "involuntary emigration of such a huge number of people would aggravate social and religious problems, create international tension and seriously undermine the process of detente in international relations". In other words, to ease the tension with Hitler and prevent the growth of anti-Semitism in the democratic countries, the Jews were to be abandoned to their fate, while there was still a chance of saving them.

The question raised by Rubinstein is of great interest. The Jews found no international institution prepared to make a clear stand against the Nazi policy of extermination. If there were any righteous men in civil society at large, there were certainly none in the echelons of democratic power or in international bodies, such as the Church, the League of Nations or even the Red Cross.

And this terrible realization left the survivors in a state of shock and disbelief.

The experience of the Holocaust shows that, in the face of radical evil, responsibility must be shouldered on two levels: with a sense of personal responsibility, that should encourage each individual to react when politics discredits the principle of the sacredness of human life; and through the responsibility of international bodies with effective powers – unlike the mainly impotent and paralyzed United Nations – to which victims and people of conscience can appeal in the dark times that cloud our planet.

In the third millennium, and in this global world of ours, in which digital television and information highways make it impossible for anyone to deny knowledge of an ongoing massacre, there is no escaping this new form of responsibility.

⁵ Amnon Rubinstein, *The trauma of Evian*, Ha'aretz, 23 November 2003.

The amazing development of these means of communication has brought home the enormous value of Immanuel Kant's intuitive thinking in his book "Idea for a universal history from a cosmopolitan viewpoint", in which he had observed that the world we live in is a sphere.

The remark may seem banal, but the German philosopher had drawn some basic conclusions from it.

First, that since we all live and move on the surface of this sphere, we have no other refuge and are therefore destined to live next to and with one another for ever.

There are no secluded places to hide in and we can feel the consequences of whatever happens to our fellow men.

Secondly, as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman⁶ observed, Nature draws the ultimate horizon of universal history and encourages us to consider the world as a single, borderless place, where humankind is "united in a perfect civil whole".

Thirdly - as Primo Levi had realized - we understand, perhaps as never before in human history, that no man is an island, anywhere in the world, and that each man's destiny is our concern. The concept of responsibility for our fellows therefore stretches beyond the restricted space of the territory in which we live.

Therefore, although contemporaries of the events of the Holocaust could justify their inaction by claiming ignorance of Hitler's plans, a similar excuse would be unthinkable today, since information is readily accessible to everyone in all four corners of the globe.

As Bauman observes, each and every one of us can witness a breach of human rights simply by turning on the television⁷. And if someone asks us why we do nothing, we reply along the following lines:

"I heard about it and I was horrified, but what could I have done, I had no means of doing anything about it".

This gap between knowing and actually being able to do something in a world that appears increasingly united, is one of the great challenges in the battle to defend human dignity.

Perhaps the only way to try to bridge the gap is by developing international organizations with effective powers to intervene for humanitarian reasons wherever crimes are committed.

Regrettably, as things stand at present, the member states of the United Nations share no moral nor political code of behaviour on which to base common action against the perpetrators of crimes against humanity, nor do they have the will to take up the arms of political,

⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *La società sotto assedio* [Society under siege], Edizioni Laterza, Bari, 2003, p. 107.

⁷ *ibidem*, p. 224

military or economic dissuasion capable of discrediting the sovereignty of individual States in the event of radical evil.

An example is provided by the difficulty encountered in setting up an international tribunal to judge those responsible for crimes against humanity, not only due to the opposition of the United States administration, but also because numerous countries with dictatorial regimes would not accept judgement by a supranational court.

And yet if an institution of this kind were supported by men of culture and by democrats from all over the world, it could not only become a moral benchmark for those who oppose genocide, but could also serve as a warning for potential torturers and mass murderers. If we examine the behaviour of the lager commandants and the Russian Chekists, we find one singular similarity. Both boasted of their ideological master plans for eliminating the Jews or the so-called enemies of the people, while at the same time scientifically covering up all proof of their misdeeds, as if they feared that judgement would one day catch up with them.

Anatoli Razumov notes how in the years of Stalin's great terror, the press only released the names of a few of those sentenced to death, while hiding the truth about the extent of the mass murders. The families of the missing were in fact told that their loved ones were in the gulags and were not allowed to correspond with the outside world, but nothing was said about the executions. And even after Stalin's death, during the 'thaw' under Khrushchev, the truth still failed to emerge and the death certificates circulated stated that the missing had died in the camps due to illness or natural causes.

Primo Levi himself wondered about the Nazis' sudden decision to dismantle the death camps with the imminent arrival of the allied troops. It was as if they were afraid of punishment for the crimes they had committed. In this key too we should read the bureaucratic and coded language used to describe the plans for the final solution, carefully formulated to avoid an explosion of indignation.

Considering such contorted behaviour – prompted by fear of scandal and of retribution, as well as by a hidden sense of shame – we can imagine the deterrent effect that the institution of a permanent international tribunal with the prospect of jail sentences could have, and how it might encourage many to hold back.

It will be a long time before political tools to prevent crimes against humanity are effective, but putting them in place within the context of the European Community and of the United Nations, however slow and difficult, would encourage future witnesses to shoulder their responsibilities in the face of extreme evil.

At least it would avoid a repetition of the tragic sense of solitude experienced by the victims of Auschwitz and of Kolyma, who never felt the repercussions of a stand taken in their defence by a single institution in the whole wide world.

An example is the despair felt by Leon Feiner and Menachem Kirschenbaum, two leaders of the Bund, the Jewish workers' party in the Warsaw ghetto. Aware of the tragedy unfolding while the rest of the world stood by, they asked the emissary of the Polish resistance movement, Jan Karski, to address the Jewish leaders he was due to meet in Europe as follows:

“You ask what kind of action I suggest our leaders should take. Tell them to go to all the most important offices and to the Jewish agencies and not to budge until they have obtained a guarantee that something has been decided to save the Jews. Tell them not to accept anything, not to drink, nor to eat, but to die a slow death while the world looks on. Yes, to let themselves die. That might shake the conscience of the world”⁸.

But the world remained unmoved even after the suicide of Szmul Zygielbojm, the Jewish representative of the Polish government in exile in London. He failed to find a single organization willing to listen to the Bund leaders' appeal and, in despair, after the final annihilation of the Warsaw ghetto, found that he no longer had any reason to live.

All victims of crimes against humanity, worldwide, appeal to the international community to stop their persecutors and the States that support them. And yet, every appeal is greeted somewhere in the democratic west by objections that an act of war would aggravate the international situation and that the people oppressed by evil should rise up and free themselves.

This is the excuse made not only by the nation states, but often by public opinion too, not to have pay the price in human lives of accepting responsibility for an ongoing genocide.

The mechanisms that allow international agencies and public opinion to turn a deaf ear have changed little since Auschwitz and Kolyma.

REMEMBERING COMMUNISM

Is there any real chance of the term “righteous” one day being applied to those who tried to safeguard human dignity under Soviet totalitarianism? And will such people enter the collective imagination like Oskar Schindler and other rescuers of the Jews?

⁸ Gabriele Nissim, *Il Tribunale...*, op. cit., p. 167.

It will all depend on the outcome of the battle to keep alive historical memory of the gulags and of the crimes committed under Soviet totalitarianism.

As long as the thousands of victims of Soviet socialism continue to be seen as 'collateral damage' in an unsuccessful attempt to find an alternative to the market economy and improve the human condition, it is unlikely that the universal value of those who tried to withstand the brutalities inflicted by the Soviet regime will be acknowledged.

It is still widely believed that the evil produced in the USSR was all part of a great experiment in goodness, aimed at establishing justice and equality on this earth; and this stops individuals who tried to resist it from being acknowledged as a moral example.

In the Sixties, Jean-Paul Sartre aptly summed up prevailing left-wing thinking when he recommended keeping quiet about the horrors of the gulag in order not to dash the hopes of the workers in their struggle against capitalism. Today, this mechanism has fortunately been attenuated, but there are still those who are ready to cite the same recommendation, as if the very word 'gulag' contained a trap for anyone who has the rights of the outcast at heart.

Talk about the Nazi concentration camps automatically triggers a sense of indignation, but the same cannot be said of the gulag system and nobody even knows why it was set up.

Despite the important progress of historical research since the fall of the Berlin wall, there is still widespread ignorance about the ideological *eliminationist* core of communist totalitarianism, which established which categories of people deserved to live on this earth and which were to be excluded.

The communists, much like the Nazis, actually planned *creative destruction* in order to achieve a new social order.

Like gardeners, they imagined society as a huge field contaminated by certain harmful and unnecessary species of men and women and considered it their job to weed them out. They were not nihilists, their aim was not to create a *desert*, but rather to plan a fabulous, flowering *garden* by eliminating weeds and withered branches.

Although the Chekists recruited for the purpose took sadistic pleasure in murder and gratuitous violence, the death of others was considered creative because it was a means for achieving the happiness and redemption of the human race.

Defining them as *enemies of the people* had nothing to do with their belonging to a particular ethnic or national group, as had been the case with the Jews or the Armenians, but was based on the temporary identification of social groups randomly considered dangerous according to economic, social, political or ideological criteria.

The concept of *enemy* was constantly being extended, updated and reinforced – as Sergej Chodorovic observes – because the communists were not only trying to consolidate their power but were aiming to build a new man to suit the totalitarian society that they dreamed of creating.

The only people who would be worthy of living in their garden were those who rejected their religious or national heritage, spurned links with the outside world, the negative influence of decadent western culture and the idea of ownership and were ready to blindly follow the directives of the party and sacrifice their families, their friends and even love for the communist ideal.

Those who refused to renounce not only their own cultural identity but even the normal sentiments that distinguish the dignity of a human being, such as friendship, compassion, pity, the search for truth or the defence of personal principles, automatically belonged to the category of the weeds, which either had to be neutralized, by means of re-education, or else eradicated. In fact, the authorities encouraged prisoners to denounce their fellow inmates, relatives of a designated victim to become spies, wives to divorce, children to repudiate their parents, friends to betray their friends.

In the communist world the *homo sovieticus* project was incompatible with Man, and for the Party this created the need for a permanent revolution against the whole of society.

The concept of class struggle, which the authorities used every time a new political campaign was launched, erroneously leads to such struggles being aimed at social emancipation: in actual fact, it was an ingenious political invention to invent new categories of enemies.

Once a new set of targets of the revolutionary struggle had been identified by the central committee, whether they were aristocrats, members of the bourgeoisie, religious believers, kulaks, party members who had expressed even a hint of dissent, leaders of national minorities, Jews known as Zionists or whoever belonged to any of the categories of enemies, they were branded for life.

There is perhaps no better description of this inescapable condition of imprisoned identity than the one described by Andrei Makine in his extraordinary tale "Music of a life"⁹.

The young musician Alexsei Berg, guilty simply of belonging to a family of intellectuals disliked by the regime, hunted by the police after his parents' arrest, betrayed by his girlfriend's father, tried desperately to escape from his own identity by wearing the uniform of a soldier who had died during the German invasion. He thought he had saved himself

⁹ Andrei Makine, *La musica di una vita* [*Music of a life*], Einaudi, Turin, 2003.

from a terrible fate by entering the body of another man. Despite his heroism in war under his new identity, his incredible efforts to live in another man's shoes and the strict self-control that enabled him to keep his true thoughts to himself, he failed to stifle his emotions. He had tried desperately to conceal his real feelings from the woman he loved and had even hidden his musical talent from her to allay any suspicion, but during a party at which the young woman's engagement to someone else was announced, he could bear it no longer and poured his heart and soul into his piano playing.

The price of his weakness was deportation to the gulag. In reality, it had not just been an incautious gesture, but a demonstration of the impossibility of hiding from one's own soul. This is why, sooner or later, the regime always managed to unmask any form of deception.

The story is an extraordinary metaphor for the indelible sense of guilt that communism imposed on its victims, similar to that suffered by the Jews under Nazism: a brand mark that could never be erased.

Those classified as enemies became worthless, dangerous, harmful for society, and were immediately marginalized by their families, their friends and their workmates. As Lev Razgon, who spent no fewer than 17 years in Stalin's camps, suggests, the fear that wracked the persecuted in the days leading up to their arrest was something completely different from the fear normally experienced by people who have committed a serious breach of the law and are hunted by the police or are awaiting an imminent sentence from the court. What they felt was the shock of finding themselves, from one day to the next, excluded from a society that no longer considered them worthy of membership.

A silent telephone was the first sign of excommunication, because nobody wanted to contact a person being investigated by the NKVD. Those in fear of imminent arrest noticed that their neighbours looked away as they passed and failed to exchange their greetings, and they found this intolerable.

The authorities had the extraordinary power to deprive them of their dignity, excluding them from the *pietas* of their fellows. And instead of reacting angrily, the designated victim – notes Razgon – felt a sense of shame, as if he were really guilty of some terrible crime.

"I would have done anything to quell the sense of hatred, disgust and shame that overwhelmed me ... the hatred, I suppose, was understandable, the disgust too, but why should I have felt ashamed?... I had been turned into a quivering creature, to coin a phrase from Dostoyevski "¹⁰.

¹⁰ Lev Razgon, *La vie sans lendemains*, Horay, Paris, 1991, p. 82.

It was precisely this feeling of shame induced by their exclusion from society that made the designated victims more ready to capitulate and confess non-existent misdeeds when charged by the authorities.

There is a definite analogy between the state of solitude suffered by the Jews as a result of the racial laws in Germany, when yesterday's friends suddenly turned their backs on them – as Hannah Arendt observed – and that of the various categories of *enemies of the people* outlawed by the Soviet communist party.

In both systems the victims had been excluded, for political and ideological reasons, from belonging to the human race and as soon as this border had been crossed, there was no limit to the persecution that could be inflicted on them.

When all the barriers are down, a man can be subjected to an infinity of horrors: death in the gas chambers, summary execution along with hundreds of thousands of others according to the quota per region system – as happened in 1938, during the Stalinist terror – induced genocidal famine in the Ukraine, the transfer of millions of people to camps.

As Margarethe Buber-Neumann observes¹¹, the fundamental difference between Nazism and Communism was in the method used to eliminate those considered harmful for society. While the Nazis used artificial means in the gas chambers, the Chekists relied on natural selection and on deliberately instigating the very worst human instincts, so that the weakest would slowly succumb to the cold and hunger, in slave labour conditions that mercilessly drove prisoners to compete with each other for survival.

Under the Nazi regime, the time that elapsed between detention and death in the camps was relatively short, whereas under Soviet totalitarianism the limbo of the grey zone in which victims inexorably became dehumanized – so admirably described by both Primo Levi and Varlam Shalamov – stretched into interminable years of humiliation and suffering before the prisoner met his death.

This explains the exasperated pessimism underlying the *Kolyma Tales*, expressed in the prisoner's endless odyssey, surrounded by his increasingly desperate and despairing fellow detainees, as if he were forced to witness the death of humanity for an unbearably long time before dying himself. And he is assailed by agonizing doubt about whether it would not be preferable to die sooner, rather than contemplate total decadence amidst physical and spiritual suffering.

¹¹ Margarethe Buber-Neumann, *Qui est pire, Satan ou Belzébuth?*, in “Le Figaro Littéraire”, 25 February 1950, quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *Memoria del male tentazione del bene*, Garzanti, Milan, 2001, p. 128.

It is precisely the time dimension that distinguishes Shalamov's perception from that of Primo Levi. In the grey zone of the Nazi camp, Levi observed how quickly a human being could become dehumanized and move rapidly towards death, and he conveyed his shock at the speed with which an individual's values could be overturned. Shalamov's tales, on the other hand, describe the hopelessness of a grey zone without end, typical of the Soviet method of slow but no less implacable elimination.

THE DIFFICULTY OF KEEPING MEMORY ALIVE

At least in the United States and in Europe, the battle to keep memory of the Holocaust alive has been successful and has created an important barrier against rising tides of anti-Semitism. So what will it take to win the battle for historical memory of the gulag?

Will teachers one day talk of Kolyma in their schools, in the same way they do about Auschwitz, will they explain who the Chekists were, in the same way they explain about the Nazis, will they mention the Soviet extermination camps when they teach their students about Hitler's final solution? And will students read Shalamov along with Primo Levi?

First of all, it is essential to remember that, like the Holocaust and Nazi Fascism, the Communist experience was part and parcel of European history and was not limited to a single country, Russia. On the contrary, it dramatically conditioned the affairs of all the countries of central-eastern Europe and appealed not only to western Communist parties, but also to important swathes of European culture, attracted by the mirage of a classless socialist society.

Analysis of this historical period and our duty to keep memory of its events alive cannot therefore be limited to a mere handful of political fringes, but must become a constant in European cultural life.

The Nazi lagers and the Communist camps are two different stories, with different geneses, but in their elimination of *superfluous* human beings for political ends they are similar. Moreover, the behaviour of the architects and of the executors of the extermination plans, the attitude of the onlookers and the suffering of the victims, have many points in common. They should be compared without prejudice and become part of our common heritage. It is absolutely ridiculous to analyze one set of circumstances in terms of the other, as if, for political reasons, it were necessary to define a hierarchy of evil.

For some, it seems as though comparing the gulags with the Nazi lagers might diminish the Nazis' responsibilities and trivialize the

Holocaust, or, on the other hand, that remembering the Holocaust could be an obstacle to understanding and remembering the gulags. Today, in Italy, separate days have been set aside to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust, the Gulag and the Foibe. Although it is obviously important to prolong remembrance of them all, because this stimulates long overdue reflection, we risk hindering a comparison between the different events and the chance to analyze the dynamics of evil common to them all. Those who take part in these commemorative events may fall into the mental trap of believing that it is more important to remember one tragedy rather than another.

And yet numerous theoretical and philosophical concepts developed with reference to the Shoah – such as the grey zone, the banality of evil, the dehumanization of the victims, indifference, individual responsibility under a dictatorship, the righteous – enable us not only to investigate other genocides better, but to identify how the eliminationist drive, introduced in the name of a superior order, affected not only the Jews, the Armenians and the Soviet victims, but ran right across the human condition of the Twentieth century.

Heightening awareness of this Evil, which is always latent in the public arena, is what the battle for historical memory is all about.

This is why we should organize a symbolic European day in memory of all the victims of the Nazi and Soviet camps and of all the genocides that have pockmarked the face of the 20th century, starting from the genocide of the Armenians. Marking a day of common mourning would show that the peoples of Europe who have enjoyed democracy since the end of the Second World War, recognize the evil perpetrated in their history and that Europe will never again remain impassive to the fate of victims of future totalitarianism, wherever it may raise its ugly head in our common domain, as Kant had theorized.

One of the great paradoxes of post-'89 Europe, after the fall of the Berlin wall and the eclipse of the Soviet enemy, is the loss of interest in the anti-totalitarian thinking of the dissidents of the former communist empire, who told the world the truth about the forced labour camps.

In the years that led up to the crisis of the bipolar world and that witnessed the Solidarity movement in Poland, the civil rights campaigns in eastern Europe, the role of Karol Woytila and the resoluteness of Ronald Reagan, there was much more intellectual curiosity about the political mechanism that had produced the gulags. A dissident like Vaclav Havel, who explained the importance of telling the truth, who professed the value of democracy and who taught not to reproduce the enemy's ideas in political discourse, was considered an

extraordinary example of how a man should behave in order to prevent Soviet evil from raising its head again.

As Alain Finkielkraut has observed,¹² anti-totalitarian thinking has bequeathed us the idea that the evil of the world cannot be overcome by eliminating social classes, overthrowing systems, or pursuing the idea of a State that imposes justice on earth from above. In reality, the battle is never over, because it is fought in the conscience of every responsible person who manages to change – by however little – the course of events in which they are caught up. The political short cuts of those who seized the right to decide who was worthy, led to them setting up camps for those they thought were not.

Today such thinking seems weak again, under the dual pressure of Islamic fundamentalists and anti-globalization activists, who re-propose an ideological and Manichean vision of the world, according to which Good on earth can only be obtained by beating the American oppressors and struggling against the capitalist classes. Once again they see "the oppressed" as the standard bearers of redemptive innocence, regardless of how they actually behave, and they imagine the birth of an avant-garde that will represent them and start the struggle against the system all over again, to eliminate the causes of human suffering once and for all.

When pacifists talk of the conflict in the Middle East, they always see Evil in Israel alone and never pause to ask themselves what type of society is envisaged by the terrorists who measure their glee by the number of victims that their suicide bombers kill or maim.

It is as if they observed the world with no memory of the tragedies of the Twentieth century.

They fail to realize that when the Islamists launch their campaigns against their Jewish and American enemies, and slit the throats of their prisoners like lambs in front of the television cameras to deny them membership of the human race, they are once again proposing the idea of a select new garden from which all weeds have been eliminated.

THE NARRATORS

To extend its reach in public opinion, historical memory of the gulag should rely not only on historians, scholars and researchers, but on a new category of people with a very particular task to perform.

¹² Alain Finkielkraut, *Contro Washington, proprio come bin Laden*, in "Liberal", April–May 2004.

We could call them the *narrators*. As happened in the aftermath of the Holocaust (and has more recently started to happen with other tragedies, such as the Armenian genocide), the narrators are called upon not only to keep the memory of these events alive in society (and this is probably the easiest part), but to convey the sense and the interpretation of those experiences to the new generations, so that the slightest hint of any similar patterns of behaviour recurring may be identified and cause the alarm bells to ring.

The most skilled narrators are those who understand that showing responsibility for victims no longer able to speak for themselves – and this is what prompts the narrators to tell their story – essentially means shouldering responsibility towards the living, or in other words towards the world that survives the catastrophe.

The narrators' prerogative is to speak on behalf of the dead, not to return to the past or to recriminate, but to teach us how to behave in our own time.

An exceptional narrator of this kind was the Frenchman David Rousset. A survivor of Buchenwald, Rousset was the author of a fundamental work on the Nazi concentration camp system. On 1 November 1950, from the pages of the "Figaro Littéraire", he launched an appeal to all ex detainees of the German camps to denounce the Soviet gulag system to the world at large.

He saw himself as an "expert" on extermination camps and wanted to offer his own very particular "professional" experience to help the world understand what was going on in the USSR.

Rousset gave this example to explain what prompted his sense of responsibility for the victims: let us imagine what we would have felt standing out in the snow in the huge floodlit yard at Buchenwald, listening to the orchestra playing and waiting to be counted, with death staring us in the face, if we had heard by chance that other deportees had been released and had told the world about their own suffering but had failed to mention ours. We would have blamed them for forgetting us and not lifting a finger to save us from our fate. That is precisely how the prisoners of the gulags must feel today, when they see that the survivors of Nazism care nothing for their fate and are leaving them to die: if we fail to heed their cries, they will think that our experience has taught us nothing. This is why we survivors, who have been marked by Auschwitz for life and have become experts on concentration camps, must be in the front line to denounce the new horrors taking place in the world.

David Rousset had understood that, above all, remembrance should serve this purpose: remembering becomes a moral act if it can reveal the new forms in which evil manifests itself in the present.

So who will the narrators of Soviet totalitarian evil be and who will celebrate those who sacrificed their lives to defend the dignity of mankind in that context?

If we look at the Shoah, we can see that, over the years, the protagonists of the battle for preserving memory have been the Jewish survivors, the Jewish communities of the diaspora and the State of Israel.

The narrators have not always been up to the task envisaged by Rousset and we can identify a variety of positions. The question of the absolute uniqueness of the Holocaust has sometimes prevented it from being compared with other genocides. Nevertheless, many witnesses, and not only famous ones such as Primo Levi, Moshe Bejski and Elie Wiesel, but also ordinary people, a host of survivors, have felt the urge to tell the story in which they were the unwilling protagonists wherever they have been able, in books, films, newspapers, on university campuses, to the younger generations and in every country. By so doing, they have given rise, for the first time, to a new category of narrators, those who tell stories of genocide.

The survivors of the Soviet camps, however, have no such visibility and there is little interest in their stories, almost as though their emotions were less important than those of the survivors of the Nazi camps.

Perhaps this silence is due to the fact that they have had no political body able to give them a voice, whereas the Jewish survivors have always been supported by the State of Israel's determination not to let the Holocaust fall into oblivion. The use that Israel has made of the Shoah to legitimize its existence in the international community is debatable. However, there is no doubt that, after the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1960, its existence encouraged the narrators of the Holocaust to speak out. It was their obstinacy that broke the wall of silence in all those countries that had been hand in glove with the Nazis.

One would have thought that after the 1989 watershed, it would have been easy for Russia to defend the memory of its victims, as Israel had done.

Moreover, while it has been hard for Germany to accept its responsibility for the extermination of the Jews, it should have been less traumatic for the former Soviet Union to come to terms with the evil perpetrated against its own people, as opposed to other ethnic groups. Turkey, for example, still refuses to accept blame for the Armenian genocide.

And yet - as Arseni Roginski observes - Putin and his cabinet evidently considered it unadvisable to present themselves to the world with

yesterday's "crimes". They have preferred to preserve the image of a prestigious nation of which they have every right to feel proud. They have opted for continuity with Russia's past as a great power, rather than as a nation of victims of the gulags, memory of whom represents a moral value for the country's history. Once again, repression has become an awkward subject, because a regime with authoritarian tendencies obviously avoids stating explicitly that the aim of the terror was to destroy the individual freedom and independence of its own people: too much talk about the past might raise some awkward questions about the authorities in power today, however great the distance travelled.

Consequently – as the promoter of Memorial reminds us – today's research into the victims of the gulags is almost all conducted by private and local organizations often working against the stream, with no political support.

This is an omission that Europe, with its new cultural identity, will eventually have to deal with: we cannot celebrate the entry of former Soviet bloc countries into the European Community and then just forget Kolyma. Today it is consolidated practice for any European leaders visiting Poland to go to Auschwitz, and to pay homage at the Yad Vashem memorial whenever they visit Israel; likewise, it should become a habit for every statesman visiting Russia to go to the places that commemorate the mass executions and the Soviet camps, such as the Perm Museum or the cemeteries of Levasovo, Butovo or Kommunarika.

There is still one very particular category of narrators, who have remained strangely silent since 1989. These are not the victims, but all those who, in various ways, clung to their illusions about the Soviet system, exercised selective amnesia as regards the camps and then greeted the end of totalitarianism as if it were a liberation.

They have opted for the short cut of "leaving the past behind them and looking to the future". They have preferred to stay silent and evidently feel no compunction to defend the memory of the victims of the chapter in history they had so firmly believed in.

On the other hand, the few ex-communists who did take this moral task upon themselves caused an outcry and were accused of "betrayal" by their former comrades. Some, such as Arthur Koestler and Ignazio Silone, became the best narrators of the totalitarian experience and, like few others, managed to describe the essence of the tragedy that took place in Russia.

In particular Jacques Rossi – as Sergio Rapetti underlines – dedicated most of his life to compiling an extraordinary manual of the gulags

which, in terms of reach and documentation, recalls Raul Hilberg's great volume¹³ about the Nazi deportations.

THE RIGHTEOUS OF THE GULAG

Who were the righteous men who managed to defend human dignity under totalitarianism, as the rescuers of the Jews had done during the final solution?

Sergei Chodorovic believes that we should distinguish between the 1920s and the years following Stalin's death, which led first to the thaw under Krushev and then to the birth of the dissident movement in the Sixties.

During the Leninist and Stalinist terror, those who resisted did so in the utmost solitude, because it was almost impossible to experience instances of solidarity or compassion in a society gripped by fear, or in a political elite infused with ideological fervour. At that time, one of Pushkin's verses seemed aptly to reflect the Russian condition: "In this our age of infamy, Man's choice is but to be a tyrant, predator or prisoner"¹⁴.

The struggle against evil had no support in hope, it found no sympathy in the surrounding environment nor could it count on international solidarity. It lay in the individual testimony of those who were aware that they could not change the course of events, but at least tried to avoid harming their fellows and to save their own sense of humanity.

Some exemplary figures offer us a glimpse of such determined and yet hopeless resistance.

In the spring of 1933 – as Nikita Struve recalls – the poet Osip Mandel'stam did what nobody else, before or after, dared to do. He wrote a poem directly attacking Stalin and his macabre taste for executions, while Russia's best-known writers were singing his praises for building the canal linking the White Sea to the Baltic (thanks to the forced labour of thousands of political prisoners). "I am ready to die" – he had said to Anna Achmatova – and in fact he ended his days in the far eastern region of Siberia, denounced by a reader from his own circle of friends.

Varlam Shalamov served his whole sentence in Kolyma without any hope of a change of direction and knowing only too well how his jailors

¹³ Raul Hilberg, *La distruzione degli ebrei d'Europa* [The Destruction of the European Jews], Einaudi, Turin, 1995, 2 vols.

¹⁴ Quoted in Sergej Chodorovic's paper *The solidarity of ordinary people and support for the prisoners' families*.

revelled in stifling every last breath of humanity in the prisoners in those mines. He lived and resisted in that hellhole as if he were one of the last men left on earth. Shortly before his death he wrote a poem expressing his surprise at having left Kolyma alive and victorious. He had not seen the world change, nor had he been able to do anything to improve it, but nevertheless, in that human desert, he had managed not to sell his soul and to remain faithful to his conscience.

He had won the fight against moral decay but only within the context of his own existence, and this was the contradiction.

In a story inspired by his long years' detention in the gulags, the Armenian writer Meguerditch Armen – as Pietro Kuciukian acutely observes – described the contrast between the individual prisoner's resistance and the corruption and indifference of the outside world. In order to survive the back-breaking labour in the forests, the prisoner Ivan Agatov made imaginary trips round Moscow, where he dreamed of returning to a happy life one day. But a shattering discovery destroyed any illusion he might have had and in despair he let himself freeze to death in front of the door of his hut. He realized, in an all too realistic dream that had taken him to the door of his own home, that his wife was having an affair with the camp inspector.

It was a metaphor for the fragility of individual resistance which could only be played out in solitude, because even those who were outside behaved with the camp rationale.

The prisoner could therefore only count on his own resources to survive, because the outside environment was totally deaf and impervious to his suffering. If love and compassion no longer existed outside, why should a prisoner defend his own dignity and not give in to corruption? And then, was it really worth staying alive? This was the tragic enigma.

Besides the prisoners' attempts to limit their own personal degradation – made in solitude and with the dramatic awareness that they would receive no solidarity – there was another form of individual resistance at the time of the Stalinist terror: it involved a moral figure of a completely new kind compared to those who had risked their lives to rescue Jews under Nazism.

Such a person was himself a victim of persecution, but one who refused to spy on his fellows or to barter his own salvation for that of his friends, family or colleagues.

During the Holocaust, Good materialized in the extremely risky support that one man offered another in danger; during the Stalinist terror, however, Good lay in a man's decision to abstain, in his refusal to become part of the evil inflicted on his fellows.

The context of such abstentions had numerous variables. From those who decided not to denounce their colleagues, thereby forfeiting their own chances of a career, to wives who refused to divorce husbands who had fallen foul of the authorities, right through to children who refused to repudiate fathers deported to the gulags. A splendid example of the latter was Luciana De Marchi who, from the age of twelve through to the fall of communism, always boasted that she was the daughter of just such an 'inconvenient' father.

There was no such thing as free choice. Choices were made under blackmail from the authorities, who used the mirage of a lighter sentence to pressure people into denouncing their fellows as soon as they had been arrested. And in turn all those who were close to them, from their families to their friends, were warned to distance themselves or share their same fate.

As in Dante's inferno, there were ever-deepening circles where blackmail by the torturers and competition for survival made abstention from evil an almost impossible challenge. Trying not to harm your fellow prisoners usually spelled death for yourself.

Not all those who were tortured behaved like the Italian Edmondo Peluso, who – as Didi Gnocchi's excellent book tells us – managed to withhold the names of his comrades from his torturers. Most of the condemned confessed to non-existent crimes and were forced to denounce their friends, acquaintances and anyone else that the police suggested they should accuse.

Francesco Cataluccio recalls that Gustav Herling, in a chapter of *A world apart*, raises the most difficult question on this subject. Is it fair to judge the deeds of people who acted in inhuman conditions and who agreed, under intense pressure, to spy on others in exchange for survival in the gulag?

Unlike Hannah Arendt – who was highly critical of the behaviour of the Jewish councils in the ghettos controlled by the Nazis – the Polish writer refused on principle to make any moral judgement, because “man can only be human in human conditions”.

Like Primo Levi, Herling was careful not to allow the responsibilities of the torturers to fall on the shoulders of victims who gave in under physical threats, torture or inhuman working conditions in the camps, aware that only a few had the physical strength (moral strength was not enough) to withstand the pressure of their persecutors.

Precisely the superhuman effort required to remain human made it even more important to honour the gestures and deeds of those who managed to avoid the rationale of competition for survival against their fellow prisoners.

These were the righteous of the gulag, those who – as Shalamov would say – passed the toughest test that Twentieth century man would ever have to face. They did not have to decide how to react to blackmail and the spectre of hunger once, ten times or a hundred times, but every single second, during their endless time in the gulag.

Shalamov realized bitterly that prisoners sometimes managed to behave decently for a certain length of time but then suddenly succumbed, as if the nth challenge from that place of torment had finally broken their spirit.

It was not perfection or consistent behaviour that counted, but the spark of humanity that a prisoner had managed to keep alive within himself, despite endless defeats.

It was the defence of his soul, as the author of the *Kolyma Tales* put it.

With the Sixties – as Chodorovic observes – the forms of repression changed: the physical elimination typical of the Stalinist terror was replaced by other forms of punishment and by administrative exclusion, although exile to the gulags was still an option and the so-called psychiatric hospitals for the criminally “unrepentant” were put in place. Communist power gave rise to what an astute Czechoslovak dissident, the writer Simecka, defined as the “civilized” violence of totalitarianism. The “infected” were dismissed from their jobs, banned from travelling and prevented from obtaining housing, while their children were denied access to a university education. The Communist State decided who was to benefit from social services, according to whether the rules of the game were accepted or not. Material life was made impossible for anyone considered unsuitable or disobedient.

But there was one important, though not very apparent, change in society: for the first time, those who withstood totalitarian evil met with *understanding* and *help* from other people.

With great intelligence, Alexander Solzhenitsyn perceived this when, in 1972, he destined a quarter of his Nobel Prize money, plus the royalties due from *The Gulag Archipelago*, to a fund in favour of the families of political prisoners. He put the money earned on the strength of his international reputation at the service of those who were persecuted by the regime.

For this project he called upon Alexander Ginzburg, a man with a reputation for freedom-fighting.

As a young student in the late Fifties and Sixties, Ginzburg had invented the *samizdat*, imagining that the typewritten sheets that were passed from hand to hand in literary circles could be bound into small volumes and thus become containers for free thought. It was an apparently simple idea, which gave the political leaders of the time

considerable headaches. For this reason in 1960, after having issued the first three numbers of “Sintaksis” magazine, Ginzburg was sentenced to two years’ hard labour in the company of common criminals in the camps of the North.

He received a second similar sentence when he made a book out of the documents on the Sinjavski-Daniel case, two writers sentenced for publishing their books abroad.

Ginzburg thus became the architect of a network of hundreds of volunteers who helped the families of the persecuted, took parcels and clothes to people in prison and in the gulags, and helped them settle back into civilian life after their release.

With the institution of the “Solzhenitsyn Fund”, the author of *The Gulag Archipelago* had helped to create a new form of resistance within Soviet totalitarianism, restoring the concept of *solidarity* that Communism had tried to remove from man’s soul. In her philosophical reflections on the relationship between man and evil, Hannah Arendt had observed that the deeds of one individual in particular situations are worth as much as the act of creation itself and can lead to a new beginning in the world.

Russia witnessed an almost primordial change in human relations: *Good* was no longer just a form of abstention from Evil when conditioned by the authorities, but went back to being a positive value and it became possible to help a man who had formerly been marginalized. The kind of hope that Varlam Shalamov had never known in all his troubled existence – and that comes above all from human warmth – was being re-kindled after years of darkness.

Similarly to what had happened during the Holocaust, many wonderful people had sacrificed their lives to defend their fellow human beings:

Yuri Galanskov, a young and talented poet, died of a gastric ulcer in November 1972 while serving a seven-year hard labour sentence.

Lina Tumanova, one of the leading lights of the “Solzhenitsyn Fund”, whose Moscow home had become the hub of an organization to help prisoners, contracted cancer in prison after her arrest in 1984, and died only a few months later at the age of 45.

The most sensational case – as Sergei Kovalev recalls – was that of Anatoli Marchenko, who died on 8 December 1986 during a hunger strike in a labour camp. His sacrifice was an attempt to induce the West to ensure the release of all political prisoners, at the time when Gorbachev was seeking international support for the perestroika.

The fall of Communism has taught us a fundamental lesson for our fight against all forms of totalitarianism and for the prevention of crimes against humanity.

For as long as it took the world to realize what was happening in the USSR and to heed the righteous people desperately trying to withstand the evil inflicted on them, the Soviet regime was free to apply its eliminationist policy with impunity

When the 1975 Helsinki agreements finally prompted the democratic nations to bring concrete pressure to bear on Moscow, to obtain respect for human rights and to offer their active solidarity to those struggling to defend human dignity, the regime gradually started to disintegrate.

As Vladimir Tol'c observes, the influence of the righteous in the Soviet empire was hugely boosted by the support given to them by free radio broadcasts. The voice of international solidarity was one of the decisive factors in restoring hope to the dissidents.

Kovalev will never forget the joy he and his fellow prisoners felt when they heard that Jimmy Carter had been elected president of the United States. Thanks to the western mass-media, in fact, Carter's declaration that "the cornerstone of new American policy is human rights" was well known in Russia.

Thus Abraham's considerations when faced with the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah have gained topical significance once more. In his tormented dialogue with God he had understood that to save the world from the contamination of evil there had to be, on the one hand, righteous men who resist and, on the other, someone ready to heed their words and come to their aid. Abraham searched for such men desperately, but found only one and was thus unable to save the two cities.

When the democratic countries finally managed to heed the righteous in Russia and come to their aid, the resistance movement spread and the Soviet empire began its own inexorable decline. The reason for the miracle of 1989 was, in part, this.

This observation is increasingly true in the globalized world, where international institutions are able to stay closer to those who defend man's dignity in emergency situations. If they instead remain aloof, this is a serious defeat.

Our latter-day Sodom is our failure to prevent crimes against humanity.

Translation by Rona Mackay