

The Garden of the Righteous in Sarajevo

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The non governmental and nonprofit organization Garden of the Righteous was registered at the beginning of September, 2001, in Sarajevo, as a branch office of Gardens of the Righteous Worldwide - GA.RI.WO, whose head office is in Milan and whose founder is Gabriele Nissim, historian and essayist. The Sarajevo organization has been founded with the intention of establishing a Garden of the Righteous in Sarajevo, which will commemorate the most recent human sufferings from warfare in Europe.

The garden will be a memorial to all those who opposed the killing, abuse, and humiliation of innocent people. In this respect, it will resemble the "Yad Vashem" in Jerusalem, devoted to all those who helped and protected the victims of the Holocaust. The aim of designing such a Garden in Sarajevo is to pay tribute to all those people, who have especially bravely and resolutely rejected legalized inhumane treatment and who helped the innocent, weak and fragile during recent wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Each planted tree will bear the name of a Righteous person who scorned danger and risked his or her life or the lives of family members, while bravely defending those who were unfairly persecuted. This Garden will rescue from oblivion all those stalwart, responsible individuals who refused to be affected by the mass euphoria that fostered criminality toward others. It should be a monument to individual decisions to resist the manipulation of the majority.

The impulse toward creating the Garden should be motivated by the highest spirit of reconciliation among nations. The Garden's museum will serve as an extensive classroom for studying ethics and ethical behavior. Future generations will need to be reminded that such people existed and are still among us.

Good people, who in the most terrible of times found the strength to talk about other peoples' goodness, as well as those who – without reckoning the cost – had the courage to do a good deed give the most impressive testimonial of the righteousness of such decisions.

I spent a good many years exploring books in order to determine whether there is some "bottom line" of human dignity and how to recognize it. After reading thousands and thousands of pages of testimony from people who had survived the hell of mass slaughter, I found what I was looking for in the book by Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz. He writes: "We, who returned home, managed to do so because of some happy circumstances or miracle, but whatever we call that, deep in our hearts we know very well that the best of us did not come home."

I think I learned from this that human dignity does have a "bottom line", and that the best of us would draw it boldly with our blood and even death, refusing to accept life at any cost, because that would mean living in our own insanity. The best of us

would choose death to preserve dignity. Some, like Dr Frankl, survived the atrocities of camp life and remained to testify that brave people really did exist and that they vanished because of their bravery. If there have been people who, even in the worst of times, and sometimes at the cost of their own lives, refused to act inhumanely themselves, and if there are people able to testify to this, have we the right to ignore them? Isn't it an imperative of the first order to talk about, write and publish in all possible media, in order to let everybody know of extraordinarily moral people who really have lived?

In the former Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there live today thousands of people who do not forget the goodness they experienced in an evil time. Even nowadays, many of them wish to add their testimony to the remembrance mosaic of people about whom one of my conversant said: "This war has shown that those who were humane stayed that way, and it is always hardest to be humane". Sarajevo is the city that symbolizes the suffering of the recent wars. At the same time it is an urban symbol of multiethnic and multicultural life. In this town, witnesses and anonymous Righteous lived and still live today. For this reason, Sarajevo deserves and has the moral obligation to register the names of all those who embodied the hope that a human being can remain humane even in the hardest of times. In the last year of the twentieth century, there simultaneously appeared the idea – both in Europe and in the USA – of commemorating the tragedies and the names of the Righteous of the twentieth century, so that the conditions will be created for permanent peace in the Third Millennium.

The Garden of the Righteous and the memorial museum will form a complementary entity.

The most famous of such memorials is Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, was established in 1953 by an act of the Israeli Knesset in order to commemorate the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, the Jewish communities which were destroyed in an attempt to eradicate the name and culture of Israel, as well as the heroism and fortitude of the Jews and the Righteous among the Nations.

The Avenue and Garden of the Righteous among the Nations honor non-Jews who acted according to the noblest principles of humanity and risked their lives to help Jews during the Holocaust. Two thousand trees, symbolic of the renewal of life, have been planted in and around the avenue. Plaques adjacent to each tree give the names of those honored, along with their country of residence during the war. A further 15,000 names of non-Jews recognized to date by Yad Vashem as Righteous among the Nations are engraved, according to country, on walls in the Garden of the Righteous among the Nations.

A second country that created a similar memorial is Armenia. April 24 has been set aside each year to commemorate the Armenian genocide. The ashes of witnesses or of the Righteous to Armenians, or a fistful of earth from their consecrated graves are taken to Yerevan. So far, the ashes of six Righteous have been carried to

Armenia. The names of James Brice, Anatole France, Johannes Lepsius, Henry Morgenthau, Armin T. Wegner and Franz Werfel are inscribed on the wall of the Genocide Memorial in Armenia. The remembrance of those non-Armenians who helped the Armenian people before, during, and after the 1915 Genocide ensures that the narrative about mass murders and deportations will not be written or composed by the aggressors or re-invented by current apologists. The voices of non-Armenians who witnessed the tragic events of 1915-1923 save from oblivion the memory of the first Genocide of the twentieth century.

Judging from the fact that there were a million and a half Armenian victims, one can suppose that there were many more Righteous than can be ascertained today, in view of the deaths of potential witnesses over the past eighty five (and more) years.

The experience of Yad Vashem and Armenia leads to the conclusion that it is very important to abbreviate the time between the tragedy itself and the collecting of testimony about the Righteous, as will be the case with the establishment of a Garden of the Righteous for the former Yugoslavia.