

THE FOREST OF THE RIGHTEOUS
by "The Gardens of the Righteous Worldwide Committee"

Along with the martyrs, the Remembrance Law passed by the Israeli Knesset in 1953 wished to pay tribute to all those who tried, during the years of the Holocaust, to save the lives of Jews condemned to death. They would be remembered beside Israel's most important site commemorating the Shoah, the great Yad Vashem centre in Jerusalem.

Such individuals have been defined as the "Righteous among the Nations". To date, on the basis of names put forward by the survivors and of research and testimony put together in various countries, no fewer than 15 thousand people have been granted this title, the highest moral honour awarded by Jews, through the state of Israel, to non-Jews.

Hence, beside the monument commemorating the Jewish victims of Nazi atrocities, another very special memorial has grown up. This is the Forest of the Righteous, in which a tree has been planted in honour of every person who made an effort to oppose the Shoah, as if to testify that the memory of radical Evil can never be separated from the memory of Good, conceived and accomplished in extreme circumstances.

This symbolic forest was created above all as a gesture of gratitude, to commemorate those who, on witnessing the persecution of the Jews, did their best to help, putting their own lives at risk and without any economic reward, solely because their consciences impelled them to prevent the death of even just one human being. It is thus the survivors' tribute to their rescuers.

But its significance goes beyond that. It also indicates that even in the conditions created by the Germans in Europe it was possible to realize what was happening, to oppose the extermination of the Jews, to break the conspiracy of silence. Those trees that grow and blossom today in the forest of Yad Vashem with the names of some of the righteous of our century testify that even in the worst circumstances, in which murder has become the law of the land and genocide is part of a political project, it is *always possible* for all human beings to make an alternative choice. Even in the darkest hours no individual's fate is preordained, history can always be pushed in the opposite direction.

This much is clearly stated in the manifesto of the forest of Jerusalem.

"The stories of the Righteous prove that it was possible to help" (¹). The alibi that the Nazi terror machine stopped all chance of voluntary moves against official policy is disproved by the stories of thousands of people who, in all walks of life, helped the Jews to survive the final solution.

The stories of the Righteous stand as an example for future generations and as a measure of moral behaviour, even in circumstances of great danger and psychological stress. They demonstrate that anyone can and must oppose evil, that resistance is possible, not only by groups, but also by a single individual. The stories of the Righteous help to counterbalance the terrible legacy of the Third Reich. Their example reminds us that life has value in itself. This is the essence of the quotation from the Talmud, which appears on the medal of the Righteous among the Nations: "Whoever saves a life, is as if he had saved the whole world".

The term "righteous" refers to a story in the Bible in which God threatened to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, because they were considered places of sin and depravity beyond redemption. In the face of such an eventuality, Abraham tried to persuade God to stay His hand and to have mercy on the inhabitants. In an agitated exchange Abraham asked Him whether, in the presence of 50 righteous people in those cities He would dare to carry His project of radical and unequivocal condemnation

¹ The "Righteous Among the Nations", Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority

through to the end. “Would You have the courage to send fifty righteous people to their deaths along with the rest of the city?” And God replied that if he found them, He would abstain from the punishment. Abraham, however, fearing that such a number of righteous would be too high, tried to bargain about the number: from 50 to 45, from 40 to 30 and so on. God agreed on 10 righteous people to save the city, but unfortunately found only one, named Lot, and Sodom and Gomorrah met a bitter end.

The story has a double meaning of extraordinary topical interest. In the face of radical evil, such as genocide, few people are strong enough to break the conspiracy of silence and to create the conditions to redeem the whole city. Here is the biblical theme of the mercy of God: those who light the spark of good represent a beacon within the “grey zone”.

Down all the roads that have led to extreme evil we come across the architects of this evil, who have drawn a clear line between friends and foes, even to the extent of proposing the physical suppression of the latter, but also a small number of people who have tried to go against the tide. Occasionally, in a scenario that could be described as *a battle ground for human dignity*, a precious few have succeeded in lighting the spark of shame and rousing a society hovering between indifference and complicity.

This has been observed in almost all the countries that have lived through the crisis of a totalitarian regime – such as the 1989 watershed in eastern Europe, where political dissidence finally managed to rouse society after nearly a century of oppression, or in some pro-Nazi regimes like Bulgaria, where the protests of a few succeeded in preventing the final solution.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EXEMPLARY STORIES

But even when evil has been perpetrated, a few righteous men can still be strong enough to save a country’s honour. They can be taken as *exemplary stories* for those peoples who have allowed themselves to be dragged into complicity in genocide.

They are the means by which a nation can re-assess its past, bring a totalitarian regime to account, learn that the evil perpetrated was not inevitable, that it could have been prevented.

They can show how, in history’s darkest hours, when the architects of violence and of hatred towards others gain the upper hand, there are still some who look for alternative routes, who withstand the conditioning of conformity and keep the torch of human dignity burning in the wilderness.

The example of those who have tried to defend their fellow human creatures shows how, even in the direst circumstances, an individual still has the chance to think and to judge for himself and that in the face of evil there is always freedom of choice.

It is no coincidence that the new generations of Germans do not see themselves as descendants of Hitler or Eichmann, but of Willy Brandt, Thomas Mann, Sergeant Anton Schmidt and Oskar Schindler.

By choosing to belong to another Germany they condemn the politics of their fathers, asserting that if they had been born in those historical circumstances, they would have taken a stand against Nazism.

We do not, however, always witness this process of moral redemption. In Turkey, which was responsible at the beginning of the century for the genocide of the Armenians, the story of Naim Bey, the prefect of Aleppo, and of other righteous men and women who took exemplary actions to defend the victims, has still not become part of a public sense of self identification. The Turkish state has in fact always denied the Armenian genocide, presenting those events as the result of a legitimate war against an enemy.

A NEW BEGINNING

By remembering the stories of the Righteous we can prevent a history marked by heinous crimes from being the exclusive province of the architects of wickedness and violence.

All too often, History with a capital H pays little attention to those who, despite never winning a decisive battle, have at least tried to turn the tide in another direction. In the end, the tale told therefore dwells only on a tragic course of events set in motion by executioners in pursuit of their victims.

Perhaps no-one has succeeded in expressing this concept as clearly as the philosopher Hannah Arendt when she recalls that the historian's task is also to salvage and redeem the protagonists of lost causes from the oblivion of history.

“If judgement is the faculty we use to deal with the past, the historian is the inquisitive investigator who, by narrating it, sits in judgement above it. And if this is true, we may be able to redeem our human dignity, by snatching it, so to speak, from the clutches of that pseudo-divinity of the modern era called History, without denying the importance of History, but denying it the right to set itself up as the final judge. Cato the Elder... pronounced a singular phrase which most adequately sums up the political principle implicit in this work of redemption. He said: “*Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni*”². (The cause of the conquerors pleased the gods, but the cause of the conquered pleased Cato) (2).

Barring a few exceptional cases, in the genocides of our century the righteous basically belong to the conquered, because their exemplary deeds did not manage to overturn the “political evil” of their time, even though they demonstrated a capacity for moral resistance or enabled a few human lives to be saved.

They are the *conquered* if you judge them from the point of view of the final result, from the point of view of the History that went wrong; whereas they are possible *conquerors* if they are not bound within their own time. Then they can stand as a moral example for the new generations and their stories, finally bound together and narrated, become part of the text of the world's conscience.

Therefore, any attempt by the righteous to stop the Evil of their time - however partial their success, however feebly the lights of their tiny stars have managed to brighten up the darkness - nevertheless represents the power of a new *beginning* for the collective memory of future generations.

That which was not accomplished in their time, can finally shine forth brightly in the next era.

RECONCILIATION

The men and women who with their deeds have said "no" to the crimes of their States and nations, and who have recognized the sufferings of their fellow creatures and have gone to their aid, take on an *unexpected* task. They often become the go-betweens for reconciliation between the victims of violence and the peoples who have persecuted them. They are able to *break* the chain of hatred, hatred that can explode between two ethnic groups who find themselves on opposite sides of the barricade in the dynamics of genocide.

The Avenue of the Righteous, which came into being almost by chance in Jerusalem after the war, has helped to reconcile many Jews with those countries where, in the course of the Second World War, they had been betrayed, persecuted, annihilated.

The stories told by those hundreds of trees have enabled many Jews to return to Germany, Hungary, Poland and Lithuania, causing them to remember their jailers, but also allowing them to rediscover other faces, other people.

² Hannah Arendt, *La vita della mente*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1987, p. 311

The miracle of the righteous sought in vain by Abraham in his dialogue with God did not lead to the salvation of Sodom and Gomorrah, nor to the prevention of the Holocaust, but it did give the Jews who survived the chance to start a *New History* after the war.

Today too it is feasible, for example, to imagine that in the tragic aftermath of ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, the memory of those who in the Serbian, or Croatian, or Muslim camp tried to save lives on the other side could help to propose a framework for a new, multi-ethnic community. A Kosovan might perhaps manage to overcome the trauma suffered at the hands of the Serbs if he were to hear about a citizen of Belgrade who made a gesture of support towards the Kosovan people.

If, however, at the end of the war, the only heroes in each nation are the fighters, the soldiers of Tudjmann, Milosevic, Arkan or the PKU, then the prevailing memory will inevitably be that of head-on confrontation, of hatred for the nation considered the enemy.

Everything will depend on not only the intellectuals of the various ethnic groups, but also on the onlookers (³), the ordinary people.

A FOREST FOR ALL THE RIGHTEOUS OF OUR CENTURY

Despite the extraordinary universal moral message of the forest of Jerusalem, the idea of paying homage to the “righteous” has so far been confined *exclusively* to the memory of the Shoah, as if it represented something involving relations between Jews and Gentiles exclusively. Up to now such an idea has never become a universal ethical parameter for revealing or bringing into focus individual deeds or moral stands which, despite differing results, attempted to oppose the genocides of our century.

Philosophers, politicians and intellectuals have never thought of generalizing the experience of Jerusalem and envisaging a *vast world forest* commemorating the experiences of all those men and women of our century who have tried to react to crimes against humanity. They have never considered that for each circumstance in which the flowers of evil have blossomed, examples of human resistance should also have been highlighted, not only after the event, but while it was actually in progress.

Planting a tree for a “righteous” person means making a symbolic gesture for that person not to be left alone.

Neglecting to do this may be due to our failure to comprehend that the 20th century has been a century of endless genocide, beginning with the annihilation of one and a half million Armenians in the deserts of Mesopotamia, followed by millions of deaths in Stalin’s gulags and in the Chinese countryside, the staggering extermination of almost 6 million Jews in the gas chambers and then by new genocides in Cambodia and in Rwanda, and moving to its conclusion with the ruins of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and in Kosovo.

We have not reflected sufficiently on one fundamental fact: that whoever has had the courage to assume responsibility against these crimes has been the protagonist of an experience that is emblematic of a certain human condition in our century. They have had to proceed against the laws of their own country, against the will of a leader, against the edicts of a State, because the extreme evil of the 20th century has been spawned right inside ideological, political and social projects.

³ The term «onlookers» is used by Hannah Arendt in *La vita della mente* to underline how, in the condition of onlooker and not of actor, man is better able to judge the events of history. Arendt quotes a parable attributed to Pythagoras and referred to by Diogenes Laertius: «Life...is like a public feast: as at all feasts, some come to compete at wrestling, others to trade, but the best come as onlookers (thetai), so in life slaves are looking for fame (doxa) or profit, the philosophers for truth». Ibidem, p. 177

Those who have *sided with the victims* have relived the experience of Antigone who refused to obey the laws of the state of Athens, which forbade her from cremating the body of her brother, considered a rebel and a traitor to the State. Just like the heroine of Sophocles' tragedy, who defied the edict in the name of the "unwritten laws of the Gods" and thereby condemned herself to death, so those who have taken a stand against extreme evil have opted to obey moral commandments, rather than the laws of the state which, in the name of genetic or social engineering, have legitimized the elimination of human beings as a necessary step.

This solitary conscience could be awarded a mark of universal solidarity, so that such deeds could be universally recognized, but except for a few memorable "militants", such tales of resistance have never been broadcast, have never been set up as moral examples, and have often vanished without trace.

The stories of Oskar Schindler, Giorgio Perlasca and Raul Wallemborg are known to many, but hardly anybody has ever heard about those who opposed the genocide of the Armenians and nobody has even bothered to find out whether there were any righteous people in the Rwanda genocide, in the Cambodian killing fields, or in the Soviet gulags.

THE LEGAL DEBATE ON GENOCIDE

As well as overdue ethical reflections it is proving difficult to set up an internationally recognized, legal framework of reference to define the concepts of genocide and of crimes against humanity perpetrated by a state.

In reaction to the shockwaves that emanated from the Jewish Holocaust, on 9/12/1948, the Convention of the United Nations introduced the crime of genocide:

"Genocide means any one of the following acts, committed with the intention of wholly or partially destroying a national, ethnic, racial or religious group as such...". The then USSR tenaciously opposed including the term "political", alongside those categories mentioned, thus preventing from inclusion in the crime the annihilation of entire social classes and so-called political enemies.

Only over the last few years and only in some individual countries has the concept of genocide been extended. In the French penal code approved in 1992, for example, genocide is defined as "the execution of a concerted plan aimed at the total or partial destruction of a national, racial or religious group, or of any group determined according to any other arbitrary criterion whatsoever". The code is thus extended to the concept of the will to annihilate a group *as such*, quite beyond any specific determination of the group. Sometimes such specificity is not even real, but deliberately created so that groups who pose a risk to the stability of power can be eliminated or used as scapegoats to allow the regime that expresses genocidal intentions to survive: in such cases the group as such doesn't even exist, but is a fantasy dreamed up by those in power, a mere invention, a fictitious creation designed as a butt for popular fury. In communist countries, for example, free use was made of such ploys, aided by ideology: the class enemy was not only a capitalist bourgeois of the older generation, but his sons and grandsons too, regardless of the social condition they had acquired under the regime. In the same way, the category of 'enemies of the people' and 'reactionaries' might be arbitrarily attributed to the very cadres of the party to be eliminated and their families (for example with the famous show trials of the nineteen fifties), with a sort of "racialization" of the groups identified as enemies.

The extension of the concept of genocide has undergone further changes in its close link with the definition of "crimes against humanity", in which it is included and of which it is the most conspicuous and tragic manifestation.

The legal concept of 'crime against humanity' dates back to the Nuremberg trials, where the court defined it in 1945 as the "assassination, extermination, slavery, deportation and any other inhuman act

committed against any civil population, before or after the war or, moreover, persecution for political, racial or religious reasons...”.

The new French penal code has applied the same changes in formulation with which it corrected the definition of genocide, but here it has also specified and added the possible “philosophical”, as well as “political” motivations, in identifying and characterizing a group of human beings in order to persecute them. A crime against humanity is therefore “the deportation, slavery or the large-scale and systematic practice of summary capital executions, kidnappings followed by the disappearance of the person kidnapped, torture or inhuman acts inspired by political, philosophical, racial or religious motivations, and organized in the execution of a concerted plan against a group of the civil population”.

Difficulties at an international level, however, do not only concern defining such crimes against humanity, but especially the possibility of bringing their perpetrators to justice in an international court. Today, in fact, despite the end of the cold war, there is still considerable reluctance to setting up an international body that would systematically and automatically take the place of national courts in trying the suspects of these crimes. Most countries fear that it could be prejudicial to their own national sovereignty.

THE EXPERIENCES OF THE “RIGHTEOUS”

There is no clear-cut definition of the concept of righteousness.

For example, there have been people who, although not persecuted themselves, because they were in the persecutors’ camp or in the variegated and many-sided camp of the onlookers of radical evil, have seen fit to take the side of the victims and to move in various ways to try to secure their salvation.

As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas affirms, even in the direst circumstances, such people have read the appeal in the faces of their fellow creatures, and have heeded that summons to responsibility, which is the fundamental and indispensable attribute of human existence.

“The bond with our fellows is only forged in the form of responsibility, whether this is welcomed or refused, whether you know how to accept it or not, whether you can actually do something concrete for your fellows or not. Saying: here I am. Doing something for someone else. Giving. Being a human spirit means this.... I analyze an interpersonal relationship as if in proximity with others – quite apart from the picture that I make for myself of the other man -, his countenance, his expressiveness (and, in this sense, the whole human body is, more or less, countenance) it were what *orders* me to serve him... his countenance asks me and orders me...”⁴.

Within this framework there are two alternatives open: the first concerns those who have *recognized* evil in the moment it was *formed*, when the enemy to be destroyed was *invented* within particular ethnic, social or political groups and a radical division was created in society between “us” and “them”.

In this case, these are people who have rejected the demonization of their fellows, despite the general tendency to conform, and have somehow intuitively felt the terrible consequences of *words*. In a speech in the Bundestag on 27 January 1998 Yehuda Bauer recalled how the ideology around which the Jewish genocide project was construed was, for the first time in history, an act of pure *fantasy*⁵, because to accuse the Jews of plotting a world-wide conspiracy, of being both communist revolutionaries and unscrupulous capitalist profiteers at one and the same time, bore no relation to reality at all. It was in fact abundantly clear that the Jews possessed neither lands, nor military garrisons, nor did they control

⁴ E. Lévinas, *Etica e Infinito: dialoghi con Philippe Nemo*, Roma, Città nuova, 1984, pp. 108-115

⁵ Yehuda Bauer, *The Specific and the Universal*, in Annual rapport 1998, The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, Jerusalem, p. 4

any national economy, that they were indeed profoundly divided not only among laymen, atheists and religious people, but even in the interpretation of religion itself. The same divide between Hutus and Tutsis that led to the terrible genocide in Rwanda had no ethnic basis either, but was practically invented first by the Belgian colonialists and then by the local leaders of the two groups that declared themselves to be each other's *implacable* enemies. And in the former Yugoslavia too the legitimacy of ethnic cleansing was theorized in 1986 when some Belgrade intellectuals in the Memorandum of the Academy of Science unilaterally reinterpreted the past to present themselves as potential victims of the Croats and of the Kosovars.

Well, whoever managed to recognize these ideological and imaginary fabrications at conception and make a stand against the racial laws, against the invention of ethnic and social enemies, against words demonizing their fellows, represents the first spark of resistance against possible crimes against humanity. Whoever succeeded in doing that not only realized that it was man's dignity that was at stake, but also managed, with extraordinary foresight, to *envisage* the possible consequences of this build-up of hatred. Experiences of this kind can be found not only in situations that have ended tragically, but also in events that have fortunately had a positive outcome. When, for example, the group of Czech leaders headed by Vaclav Havel accepted Slovakia's desire for independence, their foresight avoided the outbreak of a possible conflict between the two countries. The same thing happened in Bulgaria in 1992 when the government acknowledged the independence of the new Macedonia, without advancing any claims on a territory that had hitherto been considered part and parcel of the country. Everything was decided "miraculously" on the day that the deputy minister for foreign affairs, Stefan Tafrov, making the most of the absence of the head of his ministry, managed to convince the Bulgarian prime minister to sign a document with which Bulgaria agreed to establish normal diplomatic relations with the new state.

Tafrov had *envisaged* the possible consequences of a failure to recognize Macedonia. In Bulgaria there was a risk that with the dissolution of Yugoslavia the nationalist movement could be restored which, as at the time of the Second World War, would vindicate a revision of existing national borders, thus transforming that part of the Balkans into a new powder keg.

Tafrov had understood what the leaders of Belgrade refused to understand, that to defend the so-called rights of the Serb minority, Slovenes, Croats, and Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims have flung themselves into wars of aggression against the *enemy*.

Tafrov's rapid and determined gesture cost him his career and his job at the foreign office: he was sent abroad as an ambassador. There were then numerous politicians who imagined they would lose credibility by telling the country that they had given up the old dream of Macedonia for good. But today, following the war in Kosovo, Bulgaria is proud to be pointed to as an example of peace and tolerance throughout the region. Tafrov had prevented the beginning of an infernal vicious circle.

The second alternative envisages resistance when Evil has already been perpetrated, and here the righteous are moved, not out of conviction, foresight or imagination, but by the compassion aroused by hearing and seeing with their own eyes the suffering of their fellow men. This is very often the reaction of people who have put their faith in totalitarian ideologies, and then react to the brutal reality. They act out of compassion, rediscovering their capacity to *think* at the very last moment.

The Turkish prefect of Aleppo, Naim Bey, the Italian Giorgio Perlasca, the German soldier Schmidt belong to this category. Others like them have still to be discovered and their stories *told*.

THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE INFERNO OF THE DEATH CAMPS

There is also another very particular and dramatic category of the righteous: those who, finding themselves inside the concentration camps and gulags, where brutal repression suffocated any form of solidarity among the victims and where an infernal struggle for survival was created, somehow managed to keep the torch of human dignity burning and tried to help the other inmates.

Primo Levi paid tribute to these men and women by questioning the value of salvation from the concentration camps in itself. In one terrible page he maintained that most of these people died before the others, precisely because they were more sensitive to the sufferings of their fellows.

“The ‘rescued’ from the death camps were not the best, those predestined to do good, the message bearers: what I had seen and experienced demonstrated exactly the opposite. The survivors were, if anything, the worst, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the ‘grey zone’, the spies. This was not a definite rule (there were and there are no definite rules in human affairs), but it was a rule nonetheless....The worst, that is the best adapted, survived; the best all perished”⁽⁶⁾.

This remark does not mean that one can cease to discriminate between victims and those responsible for dehumanizing the prisoners, as if the behaviour of some of the victims in the camps could be classed along with the behaviour of their torturers. When man is reduced to certain conditions of deprivation, his animal instincts for survival extinguish the possibility of helping others. “Your life or mine, there is no other alternative” is the implacable law of the camps.

By going so far as to blame himself, Primo Levi wished to recall the exceptional value of certain human deeds performed in extreme conditions. His words are at once the most terrible indictment that a survivor of Auschwitz can make against his torturers and the highest tribute to the righteous of the camps, whose memory it will never be possible to document.

THE RIGHTEOUS WHO REMEMBER

Lastly, there are the experiences of the eyewitnesses or survivors who have made a point of preserving the memory of the genocides, both out of a sense of responsibility towards the victims, and to leave humanity an eyewitness account of the evil that had been conceived. They wished to prevent the story from being concealed, denied or removed.

One of the striking things about the genocides of our century is that bearing witness to them has always been the result of a battle fought by the survivors and by a handful of intellectuals, who have repeatedly come up against a wall of silence on the part of countries who have tried to reconfigure the events of the past in order to deny their own responsibilities.

Primo Levi recalls how, on the eve of the final defeat, the behaviour of the Germans in the concentration camps suddenly changed. As long as things had been going their way and they were sure of imposing their new order in Europe, thousands of lifeless bodies had been dumped into mass graves. “But after the turning-point marked by Stalingrad they began to have second thoughts: better to wipe out all trace immediately. The prisoners themselves were forced to exhume those wretched remains and burn them on open pyres, as if an operation of those proportions, and so unusual, could pass totally unobserved. The SS commands and the security services then made absolutely sure that no witnesses survived. This is the reasoning behind the fatal, and apparently insane, transfers with which the story of the Nazi camps drew to its conclusion in the early months of 1945: the survivors of Majdanek were moved to Auschwitz, those of Auschwitz to Buchenwald and to Mauthausen, those of Buchenwald to Bergen Belsen, the women of Ravensbruck towards Schwerin. In short, they all had to be removed before the

⁶ Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, Einaudi, Torino, 1995, pp. 63-64

liberation, redeported towards the heart of a Germany invaded from both east and west; no matter that they died on the way, all that mattered was that they couldn't tell. The Lagers served first as centres of political terror, then as death factories and subsequently as an endless and constantly renewable reserve of slave labour, but they had become a risk to a Germany in its death throes because they held the secret of the extermination camps themselves, the most heinous crime in the history of humanity" (7).

In this 'snapshot' captured by Levi lies the *essence* of the mechanics of denial as far as crimes against humanity are concerned. As long as ideology appears able to forge History there is no restraint, but then, faced with the imminence of defeat, all proof has to be concealed, as if a feeling of fear mixed with shame takes over and no one wants to be branded with such infamy in the eyes of the world.

We find the same behaviour among those directly responsible for the genocides, the executioners themselves. In 1989 Cviatko Gasdow was brought to trial in Bulgaria; he was the former head of the Lovec camp, where hundreds of people had perished transporting rocks in the most terrible years of Bulgarian communism. After repeatedly denying his own responsibility, Gasdow suddenly turned contemptuously to the court, saying: "There's no point in the prosecution getting all worked up, because after thirty years you won't be able to prove a thing" (8).

But psychological denial has a long shadow. It reaches out from those directly responsible to the very society in which similar horrors have been perpetrated; we find it again not only in places where an ethnic minority has been exterminated, but also in countries that have experienced totalitarian regimes under which thousands of dissidents or entire social groups considered enemies have been sent to their deaths in re-education camps.

The story of the Memorial group in Russia is a case in point: researchers trying to document the tragedy of the gulags are constantly thwarted not only by the resistance of the *apparatchiks* but also because it is a very complex process for a society that has tolerated evil for decades to search its own conscience.

In reality, as the Hungarian Istvan Bibo wrote in 1944, acknowledging the sins of the past is not a sign of infamy for a nation, but rather an index of its maturity. "It is time to stop attenuating the moral value of accepting one's responsibilities... in the long run, the esteem that the world has for us, and which will tip the balance when comparing us with other nations, will not depend on the number of wrongs we have committed or caused, but on the seriousness and determination with which we have established our responsibilities" (9).

In the years immediately following the war, Istvan Bibo was perhaps the only great intellectual of an eastern European country allied with Germany to have the courage to publicly denounce the complicity of his own country in the genocide of the Jews.

On the same wavelength, forty years later, Jan Blonski emphasized how Poland's need for moral purification was long overdue.

In a controversial article published on 11 April 1987 on the Tygodnik Powszechny, Blonski demonstrated unparalleled courage among Polish intellectuals by accusing society of indifference both to the Holocaust and to the memory thereof.

"The country is not a hotel that can be washed (of the blood) once the guests have gonewe must stop being on the defensive, arguing in favour of our innocence, hesitating, stressing what we weren't able to do during the German occupation, and even before. We must stop emphasizing the political, social and economic conditions. First and foremost we have to say: yes, we were guilty..."

⁷ Ibidem, p. 5

⁸ Gabriele Nissim, *Il gulag bulgaro*, TSI (Italian Swiss television) documentary, 1990

⁹ Istvan Bibo, "La question juive en Hongrie après 1944", in *Misère des petits Etats de l'Europe de l'Est*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1986, pp. 250-251

An individual can be considered responsible for a crime, without even having been the material perpetrator, if he has acquiesced or not been strong enough to resist ...

If we had behaved more wisely, more nobly, in a more Christian way in the past, genocide would probably have been 'less conceivable', it would have been more difficult to carry out, and it would certainly have met with greater resistance. In other words, the society that was an eyewitness (of the Holocaust) would not have suffered from indifference or moral paralysis" (¹⁰).

Istvan Bibo and Jan Blonski, like the German philosopher Karl Jasper, can be considered contemporary examples of righteous men who have fought for the remembrance of a genocide to become an act of permanent responsibility for the nations guilty of this terrible crime or accomplices to it in some way (Hungary), or passive onlookers (Poland).

These righteous men can bring about a sort of metamorphosis. They not only encourage the survivors and their descendants to speak of their memories, but they can also weave them into the heritage of the very nation that was responsible for it.

A German who feels duty bound not to forget Auschwitz takes on the same responsibility as a Jew dealing with the memory of his bereavement.

They are rare men, if we consider the genocides of our century.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR EVIL

Looking back at the story of the genocides, you might think that it would have been quite natural to take a stand against extreme evil and just say no. Audiences watching *Life is Beautiful* or Spielberg's famous film *Schindler's List* at the cinema are usually amazed and appalled that similar atrocities can have happened and find it normal to think that if they had lived at that time they would certainly have struggled alongside the victims.

Evil seen from a distance appears easy to understand, to comprehend, but if you immerse yourself in the context in which genocides or genocidal massacres have taken place, you realize that it was not simple at all to take a stand, or even to become sensitive to the pain of the victims. Those who sided with them had to stand up against a general consensus, or fight against that particular wall of hypocrisy that leads men to remove the evil inflicted on their own kind from their conscience.

From this point of view, the case of ethnic cleansing in almost ten years of war in Yugoslavia is emblematic. From within the countries in conflict only a few very isolated voices were raised (in Serbia and in Croatia itself) in pity and in disgust for the camps and mass killings that accompanied the forced evacuation of entire minorities from their homes and lands. But on the outside too the so-called onlookers from Europa Felix turned a blind eye for years, made no effort to single out those responsible, and it was as if everything that happened there was due to a culture that is endemic to the local populations.

Thus, in the face of an apparently endless series of atrocities year after year, we witnessed the moral and political disarmament which culminated in the tragic events at Zeba and Srebrenica. In July 1995, the blue berets of the UNO, guided by General Janvier, who were supposed to ensure the protection of the threatened populations, effectively delivered thousands of Muslims into the hands of Ratko Mladic's henchmen (¹¹).

The onlookers who had turned a blind eye to evil so that they wouldn't have to accept any responsibility, had thus relieved themselves of the irksome burden of defenceless men and women, who then ended up in the mass graves prepared by the executioners.

¹⁰ Jan Blonski, *Poor Poles look at the Ghetto*, "Yad Vashem studies", vol. XIX, Jerusalem, 1998, p. 342

¹¹ Mimmo Lombezzi, *Bosnia. La Torre dei Teschi*, Baldini & Castoldi, Varese, 1996, p. 59

IDEOLOGY AND COMPASSION

One experience of the righteous has involved those who pursued the dream of a perfect society in the totalitarian experiments of our century. Despite their own ideological convictions, they managed to recognize the evil being perpetrated against human beings who were deemed a hindrance to the dream of a totally new world.

People who lived under Nazism or Communism in fact shared a political universe with numerous similarities.

In both regimes the quest was for a recipe for absolute happiness.

In both the right to kill was sanctioned.

In both there was a 'gardener' who wanted to rid the garden of weeds so that it could become a perfect lawn.

In the first experiment, the 'weeds' hindering the happiness of the human race were the Jews. The 'gardener' cleared the garden of over five million Jews.

In the second experiment, the 'gardener' thought that the 'weeds' hindering happiness were the capitalists, the class enemies, the reactionaries. In over half a century the gardener eliminated some tens of millions of them.

The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman acutely observed that the men who organized, planned and ran the concentration camps and gulags believed they were carrying out a creative project for the good of humanity.

Of the Holocaust, Cynthia Ozick has written that it was the gesture of an artist removing a stain from an otherwise perfect painting. The stain was a certain race that did not conform to the model of a perfect universe. Destroying it was a creative work, just as destroying weeds is a creative job aimed at achieving a beautiful garden.

In the case of Hitler, the design was for a pure society in terms of race. In the case of Lenin the design was for a pure society in terms of class. At stake, in both cases, was an aesthetically satisfying, transparent, homogeneous universe, purified of all discordant unsightliness. Cleansed of all backward, uneducable and untouchable features" (12).

In this scenario, the righteous are those who, at a certain point in their political and human experience and observing this practice of destroying their fellows, manage to distance themselves from that design of absolute happiness in which they had believed and identified themselves. They heed the voice of human compassion, answering the appeal of their fellow men.

Those who did so refused the logic of the system that required them to *be strong and insensitive* for the good of the political project. They thus overturned that particular concept of *virtue* typical of Nazism and Communism, (which is still present today in the mechanisms of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia) which forced them to suffocate their human weaknesses.

The communist Anna Pauker was responsible for starting up the construction of a canal along the Danube where thousands of prisoners subjected to forced labour perished. She showed no doubts when Comintern orders required her to explain to her communist cell mates in the Bucharest prison, that the party had been quite right to arrest her husband, because he was accused of being a

¹² Zygmunt Bauman, "I campi: Oriente, Occidente, Modernità", in *Nazismo, fascismo, comunismo*, by Marcello Flores, Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 1998, p. 24

“counterrevolutionary”. For the good of the cause she was expected to “swallow ” all forms of “human” reaction (13).

In his autobiography, Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz recalls that the first time he witnessed executions and torture he experienced an “inner emotion”, but did his best not to show it : “I did not want to smother my feelings of compassion for human misery. I always experienced them, but in most cases I ignored them because I was not allowed to be a wimp. To avoid being accused of weakness, I wanted a reputation as a ‘tough guy’” (14).

In the film reconstruction of the Nuremberg trials, made in 1974 by the director Sybeberg, there is an emblematic scene that highlights the perverse mechanism of the Nazi officers’ “sense of duty”.

“But did you feel no compassion?” asked the prosecutor.

“Of course we felt compassion,” replied the accused. “As Germans we could not help but feel compassion, but it was a question of building a superior order” (15).

Two young Serbs, Slobodan Panic and Cvijetin Maksimovic, captured by the Croats at Orasje, declared that they had killed and raped despite some feelings of remorse, because for the good of the cause they couldn’t ignore the rules of the game.

“The soldiers would have killed me if I hadn’t done it”, one of them said. “They were all standing around and laughing...then they brought in two Muslim prisoners and gave me a gun. I said: ‘I can’t. They haven’t done anything to me’. And they: ‘You have to or we’ll kill you’. Panic obeyed and they brought in two more and gave him a knife, saying: “Slaughter them...” (16) .

In front of the Croats, the two soldiers justified themselves by saying that they had been forced. But the most important restriction did not come from their commanding officers but rather from the necessity, in spite of everything, in spite of the disgust, to observe the moral code of the Serb nationalists. One might suggest, therefore, that a possible way out of ideological fanaticism would be to heed a sense of inner apprehension. Those who did not deny this, who did not consider it a virtue to remain unmoved, had a chance to recognize evil and possibly to act.

This is what happened, for example, to the Serb writer Wladimir Srebrov, founder, along with Karadzic, of the Serb Democratic Party, which was to become the war machine for the long chain of massacres of Bosnian Muslims.

When he saw his comrades bombing Sarajevo he was so shaken that he tried to convince his party militants to stop, to prevent the bombs from destroying schools and other places where children gather. He paid dearly for this act of rebellion. He was savagely beaten by his friends and shut away for thirty-nine months in the Serb lager of Kula (17).

THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE DEHUMANIZATION PROCESS

Another example of righteous behaviour is when an individual manages to avoid being desensitised to the victims' plight. Even in the extreme situations of the concentration camps, he succeeds in recognizing his fellow man and tries to rescue him.

You would think that the more a person is humiliated, depersonalized, reduced to a pure abstraction, the more the human conscience should rebel and the easier it should be to show solidarity towards him.

¹³ Gabriele Eschenazi, Gabriele Nissim, *Ebrei invisibili. I sopravvissuti dell'Europa Orientale dal comunismo ad oggi*, Mondadori, Milano, 1995, p. 315

¹⁴ Rudolf Hoess, *Comandante ad Auschwitz*, Einaudi, Torino, 1961, pp. 32-33

¹⁵ Mimmo Lombezzi, *Bosnia. La Torre dei Teschi*, Baldini & Castoldi, Varese, 1996, p. 36

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 42

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 47

But in fact, the experience of totalitarian regimes has proved exactly the opposite: the Nazi and the Stalinist regimes succeeded in getting society to accept the annihilation of millions of people precisely because they first eradicated the basic semblance to humanity from their victims.

Thus they not only made it easier for the executioners to fulfil their final task, but they managed to wither all forms of human compassion in society at large. They even broke down the feelings of mutual solidarity between the persecuted themselves.

The road to dehumanization has been aptly described by Hannah Arendt.

First the Jews were placed outside the protection of the law and deprived of membership of the community and of the state; any actions against them were thus legitimized. Then, by terrorising and threatening the Jews with certain death, they triggered off a horrifying, competitive struggle for survival amongst the victims, which suffocated their moral conscience. “When a man finds himself faced with the alternative of betraying his friends and thus condemning them to death, or abandoning his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their fate, how can he make a choice. When even suicide would mean the immediate assassination of his family, how can he decide? The alternative is not between good and evil, but between murder and murder ” (18).

Lastly, the victims' individuality was destroyed, by turning them into an amorphous mass, denuding them, making them live like animals amid their own excrement and constantly scrabbling for food.

“They were no longer men. They had turned into beasts who thought of nothing but food” (19), wrote Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz.

In this way the Jews were turned into *untermenschen* (sub-humans), into “superfluous” beings, “human animals” and any safeguards to prevent ill treatment broke down. The slaughterers were given a free rein in organizing the mass murders and society was able to let them die.

As Hannah Arendt observes, in all this there was a rationale: “In the context of totalitarian ideology, nothing could be more sensible and more logical: if the internees are parasites, it’s logical to gas them; if they are degenerate, they must be prevented from contaminating the population; if they have the “soul of a slave” (Himmler) it’s not worth wasting time trying to re-educate them” (20).

Communism enacted the same process of marginalizing and excluding human beings guilty of belonging to those social classes that conflicted with the needs of historical progress. By appropriating to itself the right to understand the evolution of social species, the Party decided which classes had to disappear and were therefore condemned. According to a Darwinian concept, anyone who was considered to belong to the reactionary or decadent classes was automatically guilty.

Thus, whoever was stigmatised like this was suddenly stripped naked, lost all rights to state protection, and, from one day to the next, could be barred from working, tried and imprisoned. They experienced the same solitude as the Jews outlawed by the states of the pro-Nazi area, only in this case they did not have racial laws to contend with, but social laws which excluded them from the world around them. They were persecuted not for having done something, but because they were guilty of belonging to an enemy class.

It was just a small step from the idea of eliminating certain classes to that of eliminating those who belonged to them. The fact was that any enemy who could destroy socialism had to be neutralized and there was no alternative to suppression, either by means of a death sentence or via the gulags.

This was how the process of dehumanizing the victims began, the process via which society’s natural resistance to killing could be overcome.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Le origini del totalitarismo*, Edizioni di Comunità, 1996, p. 612

¹⁹ Rudolf Hoess, *Comandante ad Auschwitz*, Einaudi, Torino, 1961

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Le origini del totalitarismo*, Edizioni di Comunità, 1996, p. 626

In a letter dated 1932, for example, the Soviet-Russian writer Maxim Gorky wrote: “Class hatred has to be cultivated by means of an organic repulsion against the enemy as an inferior being. I am intimately persuaded that the enemy is to all effects an inferior being, a degenerate on the physical but also on the ‘moral’ plane” (21).

And another Soviet-Russian writer, Vasily Grossman, explains in one of his tales that the Kulaks of the Ukraine were presented as “animals”: “to kill them it was necessary to proclaim: Kulaks are not human beings. Just as the Germans said: Jews are not human beings, so Lenin and Stalin announced: Kulaks are not human beings” (22).

The Soviet gulags not only witnessed the death of hundreds of thousands of people, but also denied the right of the victims to be remembered. The Soviet state in fact made their death anonymous and thus prevented their families from honouring their loved ones in any way.

As Hanna Arendt has observed, even in its darkest hours, the western world had always conceded the enemy dead the right to be remembered, thus clearly acknowledging their identity as human beings. In the lagers and the gulags however, individuals were robbed of death itself, thus demonstrating that from that moment on nothing belonged to them and they no longer belonged to anyone. Their death only sealed the fact that they had never existed.

This same condition of “death” paradoxically affected the survivors of the gulag archipelago, who on release were forced to sign a document before a judge in which they took an oath of silence about what they had been through.

Not only were they not entitled to talk about the extreme evil they had experienced, but they also came up against the total indifference of the population, who, for fear of the consequences, denied them any form of human solidarity.

When Salamov was released from Kolyma he found no family waiting for him. His wife had asked for a divorce and his daughter no longer wanted to see him. As the Polish writer Gustav Herling remarked, the long arm of the lager extended right into society itself, just without the barbed wire (23).

The survivors of the Nazi and communist camps were often fearful that the world outside would never believe their stories and that they would never arouse the compassion of “normal people”, because, as Alain Brossat observes, people don’t like hearing about the extreme experiences of man’s inhumanity to man (24).

But while the survivors of Auschwitz somehow managed, despite overwhelming odds, to work out their bereavement in democratic societies, those who escaped alive from the gulags found themselves in total isolation within the communist world: they were not allowed to speak and nobody wanted to know anything about them.

In such extreme situations, good deeds can hardly be seen as spectacular events, when a man abruptly manages to change the course of history, or a guard suddenly saves the lives of tens of people condemned to death. Nevertheless, small gestures in defence of human dignity take on a special value in such a context and must be documented and awarded their due value.

Salamov, for example, always fondly remembered a woman who used to pass by as the prisoners were working in the fields, and gently encouraged them by saying: “Chin up, lads, the sun will soon be going

²¹ A.Vaksberg, *Le mystère Gorkj*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1997, pp. 286-287

²² V.Grossmann, *Tutto scorre*, Mondadori, Milano, 1971, pp. 148

²³ Gustaw Herling, Piero Sinatti, *Ricordare, raccontare*, L’ancora, Napoli, 1999, p. 23

²⁴ Alan Brossat, “Il posto del sopravvissuto”, in *Nazismo, fascismo, comunismo*, by Marcello Flores, Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 1998, p. 202

down” (25). That woman had no chance of saving anyone from the lager, and the thought never even crossed her mind, but her words showed every day that she didn’t think of the prisoners as outcasts or beasts, but as human beings.

Margaret Buber-Neumann, who lived through both the gulag and then the lager, recalls the story of a soldier whose job was to supervise the women’s work, but who nevertheless agreed to go and get provisions for them one day, leaving them quite alone.

Primo Levi tells the story of Lorenzo, a non-Jewish Italian working as a labourer, who brought him and another Italian an extra bowl of soup every day.

What is remarkable is that the people who made these gestures not only recognized their fellow human creatures, despite the dehumanizing conditions, but were also moved by the necessity to preserve their own human dignity, their self-respect.

STRENGTH OF MIND

Another instance in which the “righteous” emerge in extreme situations is when someone shows that they can form their own opinions and think freely. They can transform this independence of thought into actions in defence of the lives of other human beings that the regime has branded as superfluous.

This is another concept brought to the attention of philosophic research by Hannah Arendt, who pointed out how, under totalitarian regimes, ordinary people, who would never dream of committing crimes themselves, docilely and effortlessly come to support a system in which such crimes become “normal” behaviour.

“ So what people are used to is not so much the contents of the laws..... as having a general rule into which a particular instance can be incorporated. In other words, they are used to never taking decisions. Whoever, for whatever reason or purpose, wanted to abolish old 'values' or virtues, would not encounter any difficulties as long as he was offered a new code..... The more diligently people observed the old code, the more eagerly they would adapt to the new one; the ease with which such codes of behaviour are overturned in given circumstances suggests that everyone is asleep when the reversal takes place. Our century has given us ample proof of this. How easy it was for totalitarian rulers to overthrow the fundamental commandments of western morals!”

A process of this kind does not only depend on the regime sticking to its promises, and even less on the political effects of an authoritarian regime’s bullying tactics, but rather on a mental state in which people effectively refuse to think when faced with evil.

That *absence of thought*, which the philosopher had “discovered” when she followed the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, leads most people in a totalitarian regime to do evil and to participate in it without actually “ever having taken a decision to be either bad or good”.

Thus the dirty work is done by those whose only concern is to obey orders from above, to work as a cog in the bureaucratic machine, to make a career for themselves, to live their own lives without complications, but who never actually question what is going on.

This observation about the atrophy of the capacity to form judgements is the same that Primo Levi makes about the ordinary Germans’ failure to react to the Nazi camps: “I wouldn’t call it denial, because denial is internal. You deny something you know. But here the blinds come down before you know it” (26).

²⁵ Gustaw Herling, Piero Sinatti, *Ricordare, raccontare, L’ancora*, Napoli, 1999, p. 25

²⁶ Ferdinando Camon, *Conversazione con Primo Levi*, Garzanti, Milano, 1991, p. 35

And Itsvan Bibo too observed that not wanting to believe the horror of the camps, the alibi under which many Hungarians took refuge, depended on a sort of mental sloth: “If *we refused to believe* in the extermination camps, it was not because we trusted in human kindness, but because we didn’t want to accept our own responsibility” (27).

The same dynamics of *absent thought* can be found in the behaviour of generations of communists in the eastern countries and in the west, who cleared their consciences of the fate of millions of men in the gulag archipelago.

The next step in the refusal to accept responsibility, explored by Arendt and prompted by observations by Kant and Dostoyevsky, consists of lying to yourself, safeguarding yourself against any inner crisis that might prompt you to accept your responsibility. In this way you evade your own contempt when faced with the presence of evil: you simply pretend it does not exist.

In Kosovo, for example, while Arkan’s troupes scientifically went ahead with ethnic cleansing, many Serb leaders maintained that the Albanian citizens were fleeing to escape the American bombs. It wasn’t propaganda, it was a general persuasion that enabled many citizens of the Yugoslav federation to feel that they were victims of the west and therefore in the right, regardless of any responsibility towards the citizens of Albanian origin.

Thus, precisely when evil is being perpetrated and programmed, a *denial* mechanism is triggered. People maintain that it’s just not true, it’s a pack of lies and the victims themselves become the guilty party. The conscience is side-tracked in other ways so that people can set their minds at rest, find justification for saying that they can’t do anything about it, that to help the victims would automatically mean worsening the situation and endangering their own existence.

This fabrication of alibis and lies is not only found within the totalitarian states that build concentration camps, but also among the contemporary “onlooker” states, where intellectuals, politicians and diplomats have often found a way to justify their impotence and their silence regarding the genocides. During the long years of conflict in Yugoslavia, as in the Nazi era, many people claimed that news about the crimes being committed was far-fetched.

The story of Régis Debray is a case in point. After a two-day stay in Kosovo right in the middle of the war, the French intellectual wrote an article in *Le Monde* trying to show that ethnic cleansing wasn’t really so terrible and that it had only been conducted for security reasons, with neither victims, nor terror, but in a professional manner, “Israeli-fashion”.

As Primo Levi observed, evil never occurs in isolation, but is surrounded by a vast ‘grey zone’ inhabited by numerous ‘unseeing, unspeaking and unhearing’ disbelievers.

So, in extreme situations in which the architects of violence have succeeded in creating a “thought-free” environment and a collective climate of self-deception, a righteous person is one who, first and foremost, manages to think freely and has the strength of mind to question his own conscience, disputing conformism and the rules in force around him.

Varlam Salamov, a prisoner in the terrible Kolyma region in the extreme north of Asia where prisoners worked as slaves with gruelling working hours and in impossible conditions, wrote: “I have never been free in my life, but I have always been independent”. As Gustav Herling remarks, this phrase embodies his declaration of spiritual independence: he couldn’t be free, but nobody could deprive him of his independence of thought. In his tale *Protesis* he expresses his concept of the “soul” (*dusa*) to be defended against the materialistic philosophy of totalitarianism. One day in the camp all the prisoners with prostheses have their artificial arms and legs, corsets and dentures confiscated. When it is

²⁷ Istvan Bibo, “La question juive en Hongrie après 1944”, in *Misère des petits Etats de l’Europe de l’Est*, L’Harmattan, Paris, 1986, p. 36

Salamov's turn the soldier in charge of collecting these items derisively asks: "What have you got to give? Your soul?". And Salamov replies: "No, I won't give you my soul" (28).

Vaclav Havel too, in the years of political dissidence and the birth of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, maintains that the moment of thought is the first "subversive" act against a totalitarian system and this makes an act of resistance, a new beginning, possible.

The idea of "living the truth" which the Czech president was teaching to young people was very similar to the Arendtian concept of the "silent dialogue with one's own self", which has enabled men, from Socrates onwards, to reawaken from "frozen thoughts" and from general conformism to take action once again.

From this point of view, the story of Dimitar Peshev in Bulgaria can be upheld as one of the exemplary stories of our century(29).

The deputy president of the Bulgarian parliament was a respectable man who, like many others, allowed himself to be dazzled by Germany, to the point of adopting a passive attitude to racial laws. However, faced with the imminent deportation of the Jews, not only was he ashamed of his own complicity, but with a courageous political initiative he managed to transform a personal state of mind into a collective reaction of shame on the part of the whole Bulgarian political class.

He thus succeeded in transforming the very same people whose courage had failed them up to the day before and who were about to become accomplices of the final solution, into the rescuers of all his country's Jews.

It all began when Dimitar Peshev, prompted by a friend, had used his own head to think and had realized into what climate of collective falsehood he himself had fallen. His re-found ability to think and to judge had enabled him to act and to halt that "automatic" and "irresistible" process that was leading a whole people towards genocide.

As Hannah Arendt observed, the further the scales are tipped towards catastrophe, the more miraculous a deed committed in freedom appears, even if rescue is not always guaranteed as in the case of Peshev.

²⁸ Gustaw Herling, Piero Sinatti, *Ricordare, raccontare*, L'ancora, Napoli, 1999, p. 35

²⁹ Gabriele Nissim, *L'uomo che fermò Hitler*, Mondadori, Milano, 1998