

The Virtual Gardens of the Righteous of Europe Presentation of the European WeFor project – The Righteous against totalitarian systems in Europe. European identity and conscience on the web

by Ulianova Radice, project curator

WeFor (*Web European Forest Righteous*) is a website that describes the gardens dedicated to the Righteous and, especially, the virtual gardens set up on line in order to keep their memory alive. The WeFor project, approved and supported by the European Union, is a new addition to the cultural initiative that encouraged us, ten years ago, to form the Gardens of the Righteous Committee. Our aim is to foster remembrance as an educational tool, observing the history of the 20th century from the specific viewpoint of opposition to genocide, and – for Europe – of resistance to totalitarianism. In so doing, we plan to create a series of gardens to commemorate these exemplary figures.

WeFor offers you the chance to visit such gardens from the comfort of your own desk, wherever you may be. What's more, the full English language version overcomes linguistic barriers, bringing European citizens from different countries – and especially the young – together to build a new European identity. In addition to the classic values of freedom and democracy, this identity will be based on the fundamental principle of individual responsibility as exemplified by the Righteous. Our homepage includes a video-tour of the Yad Vashem Garden of the Righteous in Jerusalem, taken from their website, so that you can see the model of our project, the first of all the Gardens of the Righteous.

Real gardens

For the real gardens, in Milan and Yerevan, we have included a video that describes them: a silent, emotional story, illustrated with images and music. For Sarajevo, where plans for the real garden are still under way, we have included a slideshow focusing on the efforts of Gariwo Sarajevo director Svetlana Broz, who is committed to restoring the conditions for dialogue and reconciliation in Bosnia after the tragedy of ethnic cleansing.

Virtual gardens

The latest additions to our project are the virtual gardens created by the Alfabeti team, our techno-partners, who have provided us with two basic innovations: the virtual reality of the gardens and their interactivity.

Our first three virtual gardens were not chosen at random.

Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki is a city that witnessed one of the worst tragedies of the Holocaust, and one that has fallen into oblivion in Europe: in 1943 the entire Jewish community (55 thousand people, almost half of the city's population) was deported, in the space of just a few months, to Auschwitz. Of these, 98% died in the concentration camp. Today Thessaloniki's Jewish community numbers fewer than a thousand people.

The only people to take a stand against this outrage were the officials of the Italian Consulate, who rescued three hundred Jews on the pretext that they were of Italian origin. The Thessaloniki virtual garden features trees commemorating these rescuers.

In the grass beneath the tree dedicated to Consul Zamboni there are flowers: this means that someone has left a tribute. Antonio Ferrari was the first to do so. He wrote "Thank you, Consul, for your courage!" Antonio Ferrari is the man who re-discovered this figure, long forgotten in Italy too.

If you would like to "adopt" a Righteous person, you can click on the butterfly and you will be regularly updated on events in the garden that concern them. But first, please register: this measure

applies to all interactivity on the site and is designed to prevent “electronic vandals” from destroying our precious gardens.

By clicking on a tree, you access the page dedicated to the relevant Righteous person. Each page provides information and material on that person.

The Lucillo Merci page, for example, includes:

- his autographed diary, in the “Original documents” section
- a documentary entitled *The righteous enemy*, in the “Faces and Voices” section
- an interview with his daughter Lucilla
- research done by Bolzano City Hall in the space set aside for in-depth analysis
- interviews with the survivors of the Thessaloniki deportations, filmed during our trip devoted to the project.

Sofia

Enter the Sofia virtual garden and you will find a completely different story to the Thessaloniki tragedy. Here the whole Jewish community was saved. Minority ethnic groups had always lived in peace in Sofia, and the Jews were no exception. This is why the garden features roses, the symbol of Bulgaria but also a reference to love.

The two decisive figures in this miracle were members of the top echelons of Sofia’s civic and religious society: Dimitar Peshev, deputy president of the Bulgarian parliament, and Metropolitan Stephan, primate of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

In particular Peshev, with his sudden appearance in the office of the Minister for the Interior, halted the deportation of the Jews, already herded onto the trains awaiting them at the stations. His action caused him to be marginalized by the pro-Nazi government and ostracized by his own political allies.

By one of those paradoxical twists of fate in human history, with the arrival of the Red Army, Peshev was tried for his allegiance to the old regime and imprisoned by the Communists. He died in poverty, alone and forgotten.

“Strolling” through the Sofia Garden, take a look at the book that has been left on the bench, join the book-crossing scheme, and exchange tips about what to read and comments on the books left for the swap.

Here you will find Gabriele Nissim’s book on Peshev, with a comment and a link to a review of the book. It was in fact Nissim that rediscovered this fundamental figure – completely forgotten in his own country and in the rest of Europe – thereby changing the perception of Bulgarian national history itself with his research. In recognition thereof, Sofia has awarded Gabriele Nissim its highest State honours.

Try clicking on the tree dedicated to Peshev and read his hitherto unpublished diaries. You can also visit the museum that his native town, Kjustendil, has dedicated to him, or find out about the various stages of his life through the photographs kindly sent to us by his family.

Warsaw

Lastly Warsaw, a special virtual garden because Poland epitomizes the extremes of European history: anti-Semitism and the Righteous among the Nations, the German occupation and anti-Nazi resistance, Communist domination and Solidarnosc. All these memories coexist, sometimes a little uneasily.

On our website we have tried to convey this complexity in our choice of the figures to be remembered: for the Holocaust, from Jan Karski, the unheeded messenger of the Jews confined inside the Warsaw ghetto, to Irena Sendler, the nurse who rescued thousands of Jewish children. Then, from Jacek Kuron and Father Popielusko – the secular and Catholic voices of Polish

dissidence – to Anna Walentynowicz, the “pasionaria” of the Danzig shipyards, who triggered the wave of strikes that led to the independent trade union Solidarnosc.

Bartoszewski was suggested by Konstancy Gebert because he personifies both memories, as a Righteous among the Nations in Yad Vashem and as a leader of Solidarnosc.

And how could we omit Marek Edelman, the legendary commander of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto and determined supporter of Solidarnosc?

In the page devoted to Edelman you can read the eulogy read at his funeral by Gebert, along with Michnik and Mazowiecki, three prominent members of Solidarnosc who also deserve a tree in this garden.

2 October marks the first anniversary of Edelman’s death.

Together with all of you, I should like to send him a tribute, and to make the most of Gebert’s presence here to ask him to dictate it.

I know that there are numerous teachers here today as well as others watching us on the web.

I propose the first appointment on WEFOR: on 2 October try sending us a tribute along with your students. Then on Monday go back to reading all the tributes and discuss them in class. I believe this is the best way to honour his memory.

Gebert sent him the first tribute. You will find his flower at the foot of the tree, signed Konstancy.

These are some very brief examples of the wealth of information, documents and material present in the gardens, in which so many exemplary figures “live on”. They are all valuable opportunities for understanding and in-depth analyses for schools.

Take part via YouFor

Our project features a special educational section. We have called it “YouFor” to underline the participatory aspect. It includes numerous ideas for learning pathways and a space specifically for work produced by schools; they can send in their completion of our pathways or other contributions of their own. We have already included some material: projects already completed by classes and sent to us by their teachers. Our thanks to them and our encouragement to continue contributing to WEFOR.

We have graded the pathways, indicating the thematic areas and degrees of complexity. Some have been sent in by teachers, others report on Polish educational experiences, still others have been prepared by our educational commission.

In search of truth

For educational work and personal research we have provided a great deal of extra material: exhibitions, essays, papers read at conferences, interviews. It is divided per subject in the “In search of truth” section.

For example, in the Communism category, under “Moral resistance and defence of truth” you will find theoretical essays, articles, historic reconstructions, personal memories and the reproduction of an issue of the magazine *e-Samizdat* devoted to the experience of *Charta ’77* in Czechoslovakia.

The side sections

The site contains a whole lot more.

Our homepage gives up-to-date news and events in synergy with Gariwo, the official Gardens of the Righteous Committee website.

Side boxes include specific in-depth analyses, photographs, tributes and book-crossings.

In the outer column there are three sections:

- “Faces and Voices”, with videos, interviews, film trailers and documentaries;
- “Not to forget”, with a collection of research institutes, museums and memorials that deal with memory in various European countries;

- “Original documents”, in which you can view reproductions of authentic material.

Like all websites, WEFOR will not stop here, ours is an ongoing process. We look forward to receiving your contributions to enrich it even further. The Virtual Gardens of the Righteous will live on thanks to you.

We'll carry on working on it ... you carry on keeping up to date.