

The Righteous and witnesses for the Armenians

by Pietro Kuciukian

The people who have tried to break the chain of pervasive evil under totalitarian regimes release us from memories that focus on suffering and resentment.

My research into the Righteous and witnesses of truth in the case of the Armenian genocide was not prompted by a sentimental or excessively conciliatory attitude, but by an ideal of reason that would help us not to lose our sense of humanity and enable us to build a future along with our fellows.

My interest in the Righteous stems from my own family history. During the Hamidian massacres of 1896 – which left over 250,000 Armenians dead – my father’s family in Constantinople was saved by a Turk who stood at the entrance to their apartment building warding off the gangs of Kurds by shouting “There are no Armenians here!”

I have travelled to my father’s native land, collected first-hand accounts and met survivors who had spoken to witnesses of atrocious acts of barbarity. I have understood the pain of being a victim of denial, the drama of seeing how extreme evil can unexpectedly take hold, created and nurtured by ideologies and by the institutions that allow evil to spread.

But the weight of memory that focuses exclusively on the evil perpetrated and on the responsibilities of the willing perpetrators led me to a restless state of resentment and anguish. The historian Raymond Kevorkian had warned me not to probe horror too deeply, or I would go mad. To avoid being overwhelmed by a burden too heavy to bear, I opted for a proactive approach: in 1995, I took the ashes of Armin Wegner to Armenia, to lay them in the Wall of Remembrance. Armin Wegner was a German officer who had photographed and documented the 1915 genocide of the Armenians perpetrated by the Turks, with the connivance of the Germans. The tribute of gratitude made by the Armenians to a citizen of a country that had connived with the genocidal plans of the Young Turks, but who had disassociated himself from the politics of his government, opened the road to reconciliation.

This led to the *International Committee of the Righteous for the Armenians. Memory is the future*, an on-going project to which I have devoted the last 15 years. My enthusiasm for it has not diminished, particularly since Gabriele Nissim and I set up *The Gardens of the Righteous* for all genocides. I have travelled far and wide in search of rescuers, witnesses to truth, people whose written accounts, documents and interventions revealed what had taken place in the secret of those desolate lands devastated by horror. I have gathered soil from their graves and placed it in the Wall of Remembrance in Dzidzernagapert, in Armenia, alongside the Garden of the Righteous. My next commitment is to honour the memory of those outlawed Turks that opposed the State-sponsored atrocities of 1915 that wiped an entire people from the homeland they had occupied for 3000 years. I have found several. They include Turks who disobeyed and who helped the victims. I would like to lay earth from their graves in the Wall of Remembrance too.

I am convinced that the memory of the Righteous, of these witnesses to truth, of the “disobedient”, is a heritage that we should cherish; it fosters dialogue, invites reconciliation and nurtures hope among the new generations.

Much has been said and written about the nature of evil, less about the nature of good. Remembering good in evil times helps the survivors not to become slaves to resentment, helps governments achieve full democracy, helps both to make peace with each other. It helps revise cultures and institutions that have created and nurtured the grey zone, the banality of evil.

The Gardens of the Righteous, both real and virtual, preserve memory, call for a commitment to bring peoples and cultures closer together and give substance to the ideals of solidarity and to the pursuit of the common good.