

Remembering the Righteous

by Gabriele Nissim

There is a debate in Israel, as Abraham Burg often reminds us.

To remember the Holocaust **so that Jews never have to experience it again**: which is clearly right and proper. But there is a weightier reason: to remember the evil perpetrated **so that no man ever has to experience it again**.

This is the spirit with which we set up the Milan Garden of the Righteous and the European **virtual gardens project**.

The Righteous have a particular prerogative: they are people who shoulder responsibility in extreme circumstances and they are always the only antidote against the recurrence of evil.

As the philosopher Hans Jonas says, no **God** intervenes in history, just human beings that **are able to work miracles**.

So why remember the Righteous?

For sure out of a sense of **gratitude**: even if history has gone wrong (the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, the gulags), the Righteous have shown **man's resoluteness and have saved the very idea of humanity**. Think of the despair of Wegner, who wrote a letter to Hitler, of Jan Karski and of Edelman in Poland, of Dimiter Peshev in Bulgaria, who forced the pro-Nazis themselves to prevent an entire people from being deported.

But there is more. The Righteous demonstrate that, whatever the circumstances, every man and woman, each in **their own small way**, can point history in a different direction.

In Prague, at the time of Charta 77, Vaclav Havel recalled that we all have a prerogative that no-one can take away from us, even in the direst straits: **it is the power that every individual has over himself**: "If everyone waited for the next man to change, nobody would achieve anything. It is not true that this is impossible: power over oneself, however limited by the character, origins, education and self-awareness of each individual, is the only thing that even the most powerless among us possess; at the same time, it is the only thing that no-one can take away from us. Anyone who exerts this power can maybe achieve something. For sure, those who never even try, will achieve nothing".

This is the same conclusion reached by Moshe Bejski – the man behind the Yad Vashem Garden of the Righteous: with the **amazement of the philosopher**, he realized that in every single place something could have been done to prevent the Holocaust.

You do not have to be **saints or heroes**, risk your life or deliberately sacrifice yourself, but every human being always has a small space in which they are sovereign.

So why remember the Righteous of Europe's totalitarian regimes? **To recall the past and thereby immerse yourself in the present**: appreciate those that safeguard human dignity in the face of fundamentalism, stand up against the stoning of women such as Neda Soltan, defend those like Anna Politkovskaya in the war in Chechnya and like Dusko Kondor, who paid a

price for his efforts to reconcile the warring ethnic factions in Sarajevo.

We have to become their friends. **We will be better people if we keep spiritual company with the outstanding moral examples of our time.**

Remembering the Righteous is not only useful in extreme situations, but it can also help us to **live better in a democracy** with the pleasure of lending a hand to those in trouble, knowing our own minds, learning how to put ourselves in other people's shoes, standing up for what is right and learning how to forgive.

The secret of the Righteous is that they behaved as they did and took risks not out of a sense of altruism or of finer feelings, but because **in the final analysis, living with dignity makes you happier.**

You forfeit this happiness if you live in a democracy in which people make ethnic generalizations about immigrants or imagine that those that think differently in a democracy are enemies or traitors rather than a source of riches for the community

The Righteous against Europe's totalitarian systems risked their lives precisely for a world free of **ethnic or political enemies.**

This is why I really like Marek Halter's idea of proposing a **European Day of the Righteous of Europe.**