

Why honour the Righteous for Armenians?

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Public awareness of history based on the memory of the evil of the 20th century, the century of genocides, arose from witness sources, narrations, museums, documentaries, films and photographs, with the consequence that memory seems to overshadow history. This is problematic, as evidenced by the political use of the memory by institutions and governments.

The historian Pierre Nora¹, spoke of “tyranny of the memory”. He pointed out the danger of manipulating memory for political purposes by the adoption of laws which could limit the freedom in historical research.

He exhorted to distinguish between memory and history “without fear of falling in the area of the *“mad negationists”* who *“produce theories to serve hate”*.”

Several voices suggest to reinvigorate historical research, to find ways so that the public area of memory be nourished by the results of history. Historical research reconstructs the past using an open approach, aims to improve methods of working with sources, to refine ways of confronting the past, since the perception of the past influences the action in the present.

The purpose of my contribution is to invite historians to take into consideration the subject of the Righteous, of the moral resisters and of the witnesses of truth of all genocides of the 20th century. Furthermore I would outline the reasons why opening the page of memory to the actions of the Righteous, could contribute to improve public awareness of history and to avoid risks of manipulation of memory for political purposes. “I respect suffering and memories – stated Pierre Nora – and proceed with historical research”. By this way, it should be possible to engage in defending both memory and freedom of the historical research.

My family story (I am a son of a survivor of the Armenian genocide) induced me to give closer attention to the suffering of my people.

The crimes perpetrated by the Young Turk government in the Ottoman Empire with the objective of creating an homogeneous nation, unveiled the danger of nationalism and its incompatibility with human rights. In totalitarian regimes evil is often born from presumptive good. Fear, propaganda and interests help to identify an enemy and the defence against this threat becomes a value. The good of the nation always exonerates the “willing executioners” of the genocides from responsibility. Such was the case in Turkey, where governments, heirs of these national identity building processes, remain negationist and furthermore are pride of the results obtained by the construction of an ethnically homogeneous nation. The Armenian nation was eradicated from its land. Suddenly all good neighbourly relations were swept away. Its culture and identity endured a tentative elimination, a loss for humanity, since all genocides concern the humanity as a whole. The will to remember developed slowly

¹ Pierre Nora contribution on “*The memory in modern times*”, Milan, Strehler Theatre, 8th May 2006

in the mind of the descendants of survivors, up to now victims of Turkey negationism.² However, today the historical research and memory of the genocide of the Armenian people have increased and proceed on the ground in the search for truth. In this way justice is rendered to the victims of genocide.

My personal research on Righteous and witnesses of truth does not arise from a sentimental or good intention attitude, but from an ideal of the reason.

First was my family story.

In the seventies I travelled to my father land, collected witnesses stories, met survivors. I tried to understand how evil arises, how the solidarity chain among human beings is interrupted. An extreme evil suddenly hits mankind, nourished by ideologies and by fanaticisms, using religion like an instrument. It also arises from hate and hidden beliefs smouldering in minds of men, which can be activated and politically used, as Daniel J. Goldhagen reminds us.³ I understood how hard can be to feel victim of a denied memory and to bear the burden of a memory based on pain and resentment.

In a page of my father's diary I found something that pushed me to move on a different way.

During the Hamidian massacres of 1895 in Constantinople my father family was saved thanks to a Turk who did not want to stay on the side of the executioners. He chose to act saving the victims of the violence. My journey in search of the memory of good started from there.

Extending the concept of "Righteous among the Nations" of Yad Vashem,⁴ a bible source concept, to non-Armenians who saved Armenians at the time of genocide, was a natural consequence. The collected testimonies referred me also to "witnesses of the truth": active testimonies who had documented and denounced what happened in the Syrian desert. This was the case of Armin Wegner, the witness of the truth for the Armenians I was concerned with.⁵ This first research of mine resulted in the founding

² Catherine Coquio writes: "The denial of the Armenian genocide produced two strictly connected negative outcomes on the research work concerning the genocide: on one side a delay in historiography followed by a permanence in the historical research without a reflection on the subjective forms of the memory ; on the other side, the difficulty of the Armenian literature to produce critical and testimonial descriptions of the event" , in AA.VV. *Storia, Verità, Giustizia. I crimini del XX secolo*, Marcello Flores ed., Bruno Mondadori, Milan 2001, p. 363.

³ "massacres do not arise from abstract structures or confused psychological pressures, but from minds and hearts of men and women", D.J. Goldhagen, *Worse than War, Peggio della guerra. Lo sterminio di massa nella storia dell'umanità*, Mondadori, Milan 2009, pp. 363-364

⁴ The Yad Vashem Garden of the Righteous was created in 1962 according to a law approved by the Israeli Parliament in 1953 which read : "By the present law we establish the Yad Vashem Foundation in Jerusalem to commemorate (...) the Righteous of the nations, who risked their life to help Jewish people. The first President of the Committee was Moshe Landau, also President of the Court that condemned Adolf Eichman to death in 1961. In 1970 he was replaced by Moshe Bejski who held the chair until 1995 and applied to the work of the Committee a new and more open interpretation of the original 1953 law.

⁵ During the 1990s ,I received as a legacy photographs which had been given as a present by a German officer to a member of our community on the occasion of a meeting at the Armenia House in Milan. The photograph documents concerned Armin T. Wegner and other eyewitnesses of the deportation march of the Armenians toward the extermination, to the Deir es Zor desert. I then met the son of Armin T. Wegner, Misha, who allowed me to use the whole of his father archive: diaries, letters, conference an speech writings. In 1995 we inaugurated in Milan an Exhibition of photographs and documents disclosing , beside the Metz Yeghèrn (Great Evil) also Wegner's engagement

in 1996 of the *International Committee of the Righteous for the Armenians. Memory is the future*.⁶ With a ceremony in Yerevan, I placed the ashes of Armin Wegner into the wall in memory of the Righteous of Dzidzernagapert, the Armenian Genocide Memorial. The warm gratitude shown by the Armenians to the son of Wegner, Misha, attending the ceremony, made me understand that the Righteous could open the way to reconciliation. At the time of Armenian genocide Germany was allied with Turkey and was involved in the genocide.

I travelled in diaspora communities visiting cemeteries where Righteous are buried, I looked for family members, reconstructed stories of men who were able to oppose evil and give witness of truth.

Some of them confronted the persecutors trying to stop deportations; others brought help to victims, eluded orders. There were also memory defenders, who paid and still today pay for their engagement in witnessing against the state negationism.⁷

Meeting Gabriele Nissim who was carrying out his investigation on Righteous for the Shoah,⁸ while I was concerned with the Righteous for the Armenians,⁹ strengthened a connection between memories, so that in 2001 we founded a Committee, *Gariwo, the Garden of the Righteous worldwide* for all genocides and totalitarian regimes.¹⁰

Who is the Righteous and which is our approach to the figure of saviours, of witnesses of the truth, of moral resisters of all genocides and totalitarianisms?

Nikita Ochotin, an historian of the Memorial Association in Moscow, to whom in 1999 we submitted our project for a meeting on the Righteous in the Gulag, had first reacted negatively: “You want to speak on good, but we, as historians, have been studying on evil for such a long time that we ourselves became evil, and with an amount of bitter irony; you refer to a certain level of moral responsibility, but when we speak about the Gulag we speak about extermination, where distinction between evil and good is impossible!”¹¹. Subsequently, as we made clear that we did not intend to issue a new moral theory or re-write an idea of justice but just look for stories of single actions and behaviours, he agreed to our project.

in defence of human rights and his efforts to promote knowledge to the world of what had happened in the Anatolia desert. To analyse iconography which includes the photographic archive “Armin T. Wegner” as guarded in Marburg, see appendix by Benedetta Guerzoni *Fotografie del genocidio armeno. Memoria, denuncia, uso pubblico*, in Marcello Flores, *Il genocidio degli armeni*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2006.

⁶ Sponsored by Giuliano Vassalli and Gagrik Harutunian, former Presidents of their respective countries Constitutional Courts, and supported by institutions and culture personalities.

⁷ After A.T. Wegner, Johannes Lepsius, Henry Morgenthau, James Brice, Giacomo Gorrini, Anatole France, Franz Werfel, Fridtjof Nansen, Papa Benedetto XV, Fayez El Ghossein, Karen Jeppe etc.

⁸ Gabriele Nissim *L'uomo che fermò Hitler*, Mondadori, Milano 2001.

⁹ Pietro Kuciukian, *Voci nel deserto. Giusti e testimoni per gli armeni*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2000.

¹⁰ Founded in Milan in 2001, *Gariwo, la foresta dei giusti* is a non profit organization involved in finding out and make known exemplary figures of Righteous and moral resisters worldwide. Together with the Milan's City Hall and the Union of the Italian Jewish Communities, Gariwo created the first Garden of the Righteous worldwide at Monte Stella in Milan. Till now 28 trees were dedicated to the Righteous of all genocides and totalitarianisms. After Yerevan, Milan, Sarajevo – where Svetlana Broz created a *Centro per il coraggio civile* – many other places were dedicated to the Righteous in Italy and all over the world: Padua, Turin, Genoa, Palermo, Catania, Florence, St. Petersburg, England, Poland and the United States. Also in Rwanda a place in Kigali for a Garden has already been chosen.

¹¹ December 1, 1999, interview released by Nikita Ochotin at Palazzo delle Stelline in Milan, to Pietro Kuciukian and Gabriele Nissim.

Why this non religious approach to a moral question? A Righteous is not a saint or a hero, he is not one who fights for the “great justice” in the name of which great crimes were often perpetrated (good intention often produce violence). A Righteous is one who faces a concrete “specific act of injustice”: recognizes it as such and acts against it¹². We do not know whether the one who acts is a righteous man, sometimes he is on the same side as the perpetrators. We only know that he, in a specific moment, acts as a Righteous because he does not accept the injustice, does not think to a homeland, sets aside ideological choices, thinks independently. He knows in advance that if he should not take action he would then consider himself different from what he thought to be. He is not capable to bear the discomfort of an omission.¹³ We do not work for a memory creating hagiographies of saviours and we will not give importance to the “celebrative” aspect. We just want to disclose the sense of these actions. Even one singular act of solidarity in opposition to evil, has an exemplary value. These actions referred to the present times, help us to recognize evil around us and to defeat indifference. Rather that speak about Righteous, we speak about “right actions”, “acts of saving”, like the case in Rwanda of the Tutsi Yolande Mukagasana that was saved by the Hutu Jacqueline Mukansonera.

The educational value of the stories of the Righteous is evident. Therefore we dedicate our activities to teachers, organizing seminars to further elaborate the matter of Righteous and related historical concepts (human rights, International Courts, negationism and so on). We also involve students in the research of stories of the Righteous, in meeting with witnesses, in tree planting ceremonies, in didactical projects.¹⁴ The example of the Righteous encourages the new generations to promote autonomous thinking, preparing them to stand suggestions of propaganda and conformism, to distinguish value of different acts and to get satisfaction from independent choices.

Summing up

What pushes me to further carry on my research on Righteous for the Armenians? My work will not be complete until I'll be able to succeed in honouring a Turkish

¹² *Actions of justice are always limited, concrete, contextual. We can only suppose that one who accomplishes justice actions, is a Righteous. We must accept an ethic of behaviour and actions, not an ethic of intentions...Rather than fighting in order that justice may rule the world, we should rather do justice to our neighbours, because if we render justice to the neighbours, perhaps justice could come in the world, otherwise we ultimately fight for an abstract concept*; see Salvatore Natoli, Milan, Casa della Cultura, 23rd April 2002, presentation of Acts of the Padua International Meeting: AA.VV. *Si può sempre dire un sì o un no. I giusti contro il genocidio degli armeni e degli ebrei*. Cleup, Padova 2002.

¹³ Hanna Arendt, *Alcune questioni di filosofia morale*, Einaudi, Torino 2006

¹⁴ *Gariwo* organizes international meetings, debates, book presentations, seminars for teachers and for the Holocaust Remembrance Day students of Lombardy schools take part to meeting with witnesses, historians, researchers and artists. *We for*, (Web European Forest Righteous), the didactics proposal of our site was chosen by the European Community to represent excellence of the projects financed and was included in a publication of the Community. From *Gariwo-We for* we launched the appeal to establish an European Day in Memory of the Righteous.

Righteous, first in Turkey and then in Armenia. Here are some among the many I found : Hamo Agha of Sindjar, Kalil Agha of Toméké,¹⁵ Ali Souad bey of Deir es Zor, Hassan Amdja of Hauran, Mustafa Aga Azizoglu of Malatia.¹⁶ I would like to organize a ceremony in Turkey in the presence of some family member and of local authorities, as we have already done for Righteous in other countries, collect some earth from their tomb and bring it to Armenia. Stimulating the Turkish national pride, as rebuilt upon the memory of good, could create the conditions for opening a dialogue between the two peoples.

The negationist propaganda of the governments had an essential role to guide knowledge of the past and favours nationalism.

I am convinced that giving voices to the Righteous, especially to those who disobeyed risking their life to help the victims and to witness the truth, could help dialogue and reconciliation.¹⁷

I am confident that valuing the actions of the Righteous could weaken the nationalism of the authoritarian regimes. Example of Righteous actions might impact the political dimension, since they would evidence a gap between politics and human rights. Authoritarian regimes are against speaking about Righteous because they are looking for an enemy with the purpose of maintaining power. Speaking about good actions is not useful to this purpose.

Could the subject of the Righteous fit in the field of historical research which usually deals with evil ? The search for the Righteous moves from good and recall the evil. Those who help victims, unveil the persecution face of power, those who denounce injustice, reveal human rights violation. Those who witness the truth discover untruth of power, and those who refuse to fulfil orders reveal the “legal barbarism” of the power.

To reconstruct stories of Righteous, make them known to the public, could serve to regenerate “the public space”,¹⁸ to prevent other crimes and to reinforce dissent voices. These voices in today’s authoritarian regimes still pay with personal freedom their courage to denounce untruth and human rights violation.

Also the establishing an European Day for Remembrance of Righteous,¹⁹ as approved by The European Parliament on a proposal of our Committee Gariwo, may help to reinvigorate democratic culture. The Righteous have preserved Europe’s moral values in the dark times of the crimes against humanity.

¹⁵ Marco Impagliazzo, *Una finestra sul massacro*, Guerini, Milano 2000

¹⁶ Mustafa Aga Azizoglu was the Mayor of the town Malatya. He was against deportation measures, helped and protected many Armenian families. He was killed by his own son, a militant member of the Union and Progress Committee who considered him a traitor, see Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, I.B. Tauris, London 2011

¹⁷ At Monte Stella in Milan there is a tree planted for Ayse Nur Zarakolu, Turkish Publisher who fought, together with her husband Ragip Zarakolu, for truth and human rights of minorities. There is also a tree for Hrant Dink, murdered in Istanbul on January 17, 2007, at the doorstep of his journal “Agos”. Turkish citizen of Armenian origin, he dedicated plenty of work to the dialogue between Turks and Armenians.

¹⁸ Sante Maletta, *Il giusto della politica. Il soggetto dissidente e lo spazio pubblico*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2012.

¹⁹ On the 10th of May 2012 the European Parliament approved a written declaration fixing the 6th of March of each year an “European Day for the Righteous of all genocides and totalitarianisms” inviting all member States to engage for memory of this Day. Declaration nr. 3/2012, 388 signatures.

Today the Righteous can help to prevent further crimes and to restrain the growth of those political groups who use hate to become visible.²⁰

Why is it so difficult in Turkey and in the Armenian world, in Rwanda, or in Bosnia to accept a proposal to honour the Righteous?

Because the proud organizers of mass killing would be compelled to admit that the perpetrators front was not so compact. The action of those who did not take part, who said no, who acted according to their conscience taking distance from mass behaviour, would be in fact the proof of the crime still denied. On the other hand the persecuted communities, by recognizing that the perpetrators front at the time of genocide was not compact, should arrive to the conclusion that it is impossible to generalize and refer to a generic “enemy people” as guilty of the genocide crime.

The engagement in favour of the Righteous has been taken up in Armenia by the director of the Dzidzernagapert Museum, historian Hayk Demoyan.

Siena, 19th June 2013

²⁰ Baruch Tenenbaum, founder of the Wallenberg Foundation, and Eduardo Eurnekian, chairman, a Jew and an Armenian, visited us in Milan to join our project: to honour the Righteous for all genocides.